



ANTHROLATIONS

The Magazine of Anthropomorphic Dramatic Fiction

Issue #3 — January, 2001

U.S. \$6.00



Darkest Night

By Tim Susman

Illustrations by Karena Kliefoth



Plus Stories By:

M.C.A. Hogarth & Corey Kellgren

Andrija Popovik & Mike McGee

and Mark Mellon



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Anthrolations is published approximately twice a year by Sofawolf Press. We welcome submissions of original first-run fiction which features anthropomorphic or zoomorphic characters and explores their interaction with the characters around them. The optimum story will be 3,000 to 5,000 words – but longer or shorter stories are happily considered, depending on available space. Anthrolations also welcomes artists interested in preparing illustrations for accepted stories.

For more information about our guidelines and submission rates, please refer to the Sofawolf Press web site.

Subscriptions

We regret that we are unable to handle subscriptions at this time. Anthrolations will be available for purchase at some conventions, or via mail order. See the Sofawolf Press web site for details.



Notes from the Editor's Desk

Welcome to issue number three of Anthrolations. Apart from being stuffed to the ears with fine anthropomorphic fiction and illustration as usual, this is also a celebratory issue for us. We've survived to make a third issue, and have enjoyed an enthusiastic response far beyond what we expected.

Issue number two was officially released at Anthrocon 2000 in July, where Sofawolf Press had its very own table for the first time. We had a wonderful time at the Convention. I met a lot of terrific people, led a panel on small press publication which was well attended, gave away a couple husky plushes, and nearly sold clean out of the first print runs of both issues...

However, immediately following the success of the convention, I ended up having to take a couple months' hiatus while I dealt with some pesky issues outside of the small press world. Luckily, apart from some lags in my editing schedule (accepted so graciously by the affected parties), it didn't impact the issue you are about to enjoy.

Tim Susman returns with another story set in the same milieu as his two-part "Many Years from Now", but focusing on the lives of a new set of characters. I first read this story of his a year ago while still waiting for the printing of Issue #1, but knew immediately that I wanted to run it in a future

issue. Karena Kliefoth has once again lent her considerable talents to the work, and provided us with our first grayscale cover art.

Both Mark Mellon and Corey Kellgren suffered through several rounds of my editing without going insane, and must be commended for their efforts as well as the quality of their workmanship. Frank Villarreal and Lonnie DiNello stepped in to provide the artwork to go along with their respective visions.

After several failed attempts at finding an artist to work on Andrija Popovic's "Drowning in Moonlight", the incomparable Stephanie Hahn was recommended to me by a friend. She not only took on the assignment, but turned out rough sketches in record time — which allowed me to relax and focus on the rest of the publication. I'm very pleased with the outcome, and as always, everyone who submitted material has my deepest respect and gratitude.

Apart from all this great writing and illustration, you'll find a couple changes in this issue too. The most exciting is the addition of J. Scott Rogers and Mike McGee to the staff. They assisted with the final proofing of the layouts, catching things that both Tim and I missed after months of exposure to the stories. Their input is greatly appreciated!

Also, you will note the appearance of the first advertisement in this issue, announcing the publication of Maggie Hogarth's chapbook, "Alysha's Fall".

While including advertising was not in my initial plan for the publication, it was a step we felt we needed to take if we wanted to continue producing the quality magazine you have come to expect. We promise to be as selective in the choice of our advertisers as we are in the choice of our contributors, which is why I chose the ad for Ms. Hogarth's book to be the first. It is a fine publication by an equally gifted writer.

So, that's what has happened since last issue. Now how about the future? Well, you can expect to see us at Further Confusion in January, and again at Anthrocon in July. We're considering raising the issue count to three per year, assuming we can get enough quality material and sufficient time to do the layouts.

We're also listening to those of you who have been asking for subscriptions. Look for an announcement sometime in early 2001, assuming we can keep the web site updated. There are also new projects in the works,

details of which will be available as things firm up. There's lots of stuff going on this spring at Sofawolf Press!

In the meantime, please enjoy the material we've gathered for you in this issue, and thanks for your interest and support! See you at the release party for Issue #4.



Would madam like to lick the cork?

Darkest Night

Tim Susman

I suppose that when the cops found me, they thought I was just another homeless person trying to sleep in the shelter of the park wall. I'm told I was curled up and naked, my slacks lying a few feet from me where the coyote had flung them. They thought I was drunk on lighter fluid or paint thinner or whatever it is the bums drink these days when they can't get wine, because I was staring straight ahead, not asleep, but not responding to them. It wasn't until they tried to move me that they smelled blood, under the other smells on me, and knew that something else wasn't right.

If I remember that time at all, it's only as a bad dream. My mind went somewhere else after the assault, and still hadn't completely come back when I was carried into an ambulance. I do vaguely remember the flashing lights. An otter sat there with me, and I think he was holding my paw. He was the one who walked me into the emergency room and sat there with me until the doctor was free. By that time, they'd looked through my wallet and discovered that I was not, in fact, homeless, and had woken up Henny and scared her half to death by telling her that her husband was in the hospital, and could she come get him please? She doesn't respond well to stress.

The doctor was a middle-aged badger, shorter and stockier than me. He told me his name, but it didn't register. When he guided me to the scale, I stepped onto it, still in a haze. He muttered, "red fox, standard coloration, 130 pounds, five feet one," as he scribbled on his chart, then offered me a cup. It smelled strong, and I think it was some kind of juice. I drank it down, but it only lifted the haze a little. He took off the blanket the medics had wrapped around me and said soothingly, "Why don't you lay down over here." I lay on the examining table on my back, and he looked me over, checked my eyes, nose and ears, then examined the stickiness on my belly fur. I shivered at his touch, not really knowing why, but he rested a paw on my chest and I calmed down. He snipped off a bit of fur and put it in a small bag, then asked me to turn over.



The smells gave him a pretty good idea of where to start. When he tried to touch the fur under my tail, encrusted with blood and other fluids the coyote had left behind, I yelled loud enough to bring two orderlies running and slammed my elbow into the poor doctor's nose.

The orderlies held me down while the doctor packed some cotton into his nose and came over to me again, long-suffering soul that he must have been. "Do you know who you are?" he said over and over as I struggled crazily against being restrained.

The question was so absurd that it stopped me. I stared at him. "Of course I do." I was taking in the uniforms and slowly damping down the adrenaline rush. The orderlies were both wolves, not coyotes, and they were holding me gently. They could tell from my flared nostrils and pinned ears that I

didn't like being held, but their expressions said that they weren't going to let me go until they were sure I wasn't going to hurt anyone again.

"Please tell me your name."

"Bret Kyle."

"Okay, Mr. Kyle. Are you going to be okay? Can I have these fellows let you go?"

I swallowed and nodded. "I think so. I'm sorry." That last just as he was taking some bloody cotton out of his nose.

He smiled graciously. "Risk of the profession." He picked up the blanket and covered me again. "Want to sit up?" I bit my lip and shook my head.

"Would you like to tell me what happened?" He sat down in a chair next to me, while the orderlies let me go and stepped back.

I looked around the room. No, I did not like to tell them what happened. I did not even like to remember what had happened, much less share it with three other men. I looked at the floor and curled my tail tightly around myself, under the blanket. "D—" I couldn't choke the word out. They waited patiently for me. "Do you all have to be here?"

The doctor looked up at the wolves and motioned towards the door with his head. They walked out quickly.

"Better?" I nodded. "All right. The police found you in the park in a state of shock, undressed. Your wallet was in your pants and had cash in it, so we assume you were assaulted sexually." He said the last word gently.

I felt tears in my eyes and started shaking again. I controlled it as best I could and nodded. The doctor offered me another cup of juice, and I drank it, trembling. He kept talking. "From what little I saw, it looks like there is some damage. I would recommend stitches as soon as possible. That would lead me to believe that your attacker was either a large cat or a large canid. I didn't see enough to notice the nature of the damage."

The smell was permeating my head and I couldn't believe he couldn't smell it on my fur. "Coyote," I whispered.

"Did you know your attacker?"

I didn't respond.

"Are you gay?"

"What? No!" I stared at the badger.

"Did you do anything to provoke the attack?"

I shook my head, feeling the pressure behind my eyes again. Why did he think it was my fault?

"Okay. I have enough to fill out a police report. Usually, in cases like this, we encourage the victim to go to the police and file a full report. In your case..." He paused. "Would you feel more comfortable talking to another fox?"

I nodded.

"Okay. There's a Sergeant Walker at the station; I've worked with him a couple times. I'll see if he's free, and you can go down and give your statement to him."

I bit my lip. I didn't want to go anywhere. "Urn...could he come here? Maybe?"

The doctor shook his head. "I don't think so. I'll ask, though. I'll just be gone a few minutes...Minnie!" A ferret appeared at the door. "Could you find one of our sexual assault counselors to sit with him?" he said, speaking low, but I heard perfectly. Her eyes got big and she stared at me. I put my ears back and looked away, embarrassed and on the verge of tears again.

I think they noticed, because they left the room then, while I struggled to get a grip on myself. I could hear movement in the hallway outside, then the low murmur of the nurse and the doctor conferring. That got fainter; they must have been walking away. From elsewhere in the hallway, nearby, I could hear the wolves talking in low tones they must have thought were inaudible. Wolves always forget we have better hearing than they do.

"...see his stomach?"

"Yeah...you know how fags are...'specially the foxes...lift their tail for anyone...looked like he didn't have such a bad time. Could've run away if he'd wanted."

"Heard they like it rough, too."

"Not like they're built to take it."

"Yeah, not from anyone but his boyfriend."

Then laughter, which was quickly hushed. I struggled to remain rational, but a wash of despair overwhelmed me. Nobody was going to take this seriously. I'd been assaulted — violated (the word was hard to say, even in my mind) — and everyone thought it was my fault. But it hadn't been.

Had it?

The nurse came back into the room, glancing disapprovingly at the hallway. She looked up at me with some sympathy, and I couldn't help looking miserable in return, especially after I saw the doctor's notes in her paw. Another person knew my story.

She handed me a hospital gown. "We have a ...procedure that we normally do with cases like yours," she said while I put it on. "Now, you're a bit more unusual...well, let me take your blood pressure and temperature." She put the thermometer in my muzzle and took my blood pressure quickly and efficiently, then took the thermometer out and noted the results.

"I'll get a counselor to sit with you. Just wait here." She started toward the door.

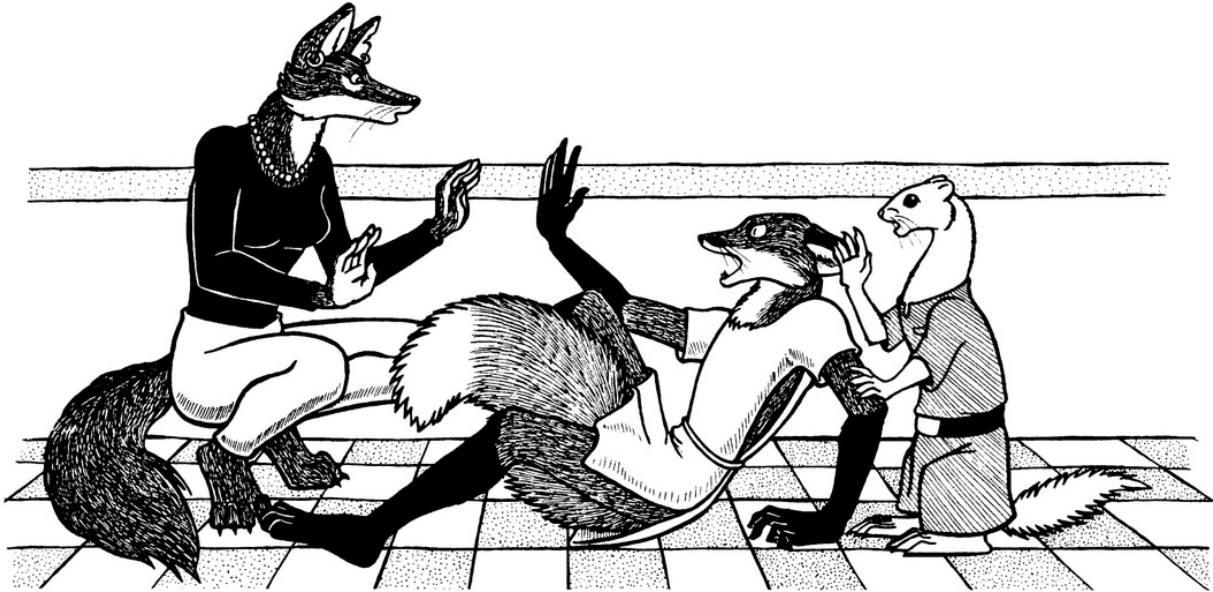
I stopped her as she was about to leave. "Maybe...maybe this is a mistake. Maybe I should just go home. It's not that bad."

She looked sternly at me. "You stay right there." Her ears flicked to the corridor outside and she poked her head out suddenly. "Julie! Julie, where's Rennie? Can you get her? Yeah, in here." She looked back at me. "Just hang on."

I lowered my ears miserably. I didn't want to talk to anyone else. I just wanted this to be over. Once I got home, I was convinced, everything would be okay.

"Rennie, c'mere. I need you to talk to this guy," the nurse was saying, and then the door opened a bit more and the coyote stepped in.

I don't even remember yelling, but I heard the yell echo in the room. The next thing I knew, I was on the floor and the two nurses were bending over me. The coyote — a *female* coyote — said "Gods, what happened to you?" Her voice was soft, nothing like his. My heart was still racing, ears pinned back, and my eyes were open so wide I thought they might fall out.



"Hey, calm down," the ferret was saying, holding my paw. I couldn't turn my head to look at her. I couldn't look away from the coyote. Slowly, my flared nostrils told me that the scent was different. Slowly, my muscles relaxed. I sagged to the floor, whimpering.

"Okay, Min, I got it from here," the coyote said. The ferret stood up and left.

"I'm Rennie, okay? I'm not going to hurt you." She sat down on the floor next to me. "Just calm down, okay?"

My heart was slowing down, but my ears stayed back, out of shame. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "Not your fault. Was it a coyote that did it?" The question shocked my ears upright. I didn't have to say anything. "I thought so. That damn Min... she doesn't think, just follows procedure."

Cautiously, I pulled myself up to a kneeling position. Rennie was small for a coyote, barely half a foot taller than I was. She had a notch out of her left ear, and her lower muzzle and throat fur was a dusty grey; the upper fur was the sandy color typical of coyotes. She didn't make any attempt to touch me, just sat near me.

"Usually I handle rape cases... women. I'm not really sure what to do, so I'll just sit here and talk, if you want to talk. I listen good, too." She glanced at me to see if I wanted to talk, but I kept quiet. I kept thinking. *Aren't I a rape victim? Am I the only male ever to be raped? Oh, gods.* "The doctor

took a report, right?" I nodded. "I haven't seen it. I don't know anything about you. I won't know anything you don't want to tell me. Okay?"

I nodded again.

"Good. Want to tell me your name?"

"Bret," I said in a whisper.

She smiled. "There you go. Hi, Bret. It's a real pleasure to meet you." Again, she didn't try to touch me or shake my paw.

We sat in silence until the doctor came back a few minutes later. I didn't see his expression when he saw us on the floor, but his voice was normal and indicated no surprise. "Thank you, Rennie."

Rennie got up and smiled down at me. "Good luck, Bret. I wish you well." As she left, I noticed that the doctor was holding my pants, neatly folded.

I stood up shakily. The doctor started to say something, stopped, and then handed me my pants. I held them awkwardly. They'd sprayed the fabric with some scent-neutral stuff, but they were still torn, and I knew I wouldn't want to wear them any longer than I had to.

He looked at the notepad he was holding. "I reached Sergeant Walker. He said he wouldn't mind coming by in about half an hour when his shift is over. He's been investigating assaults in the park. Meanwhile, with your permission, we'll go ahead and do that surgery?"

I curled my tail between my legs reflexively, but nodded.

"All right. I need to do some prep and look at your insurance. I'll see if we can find someone else to sit here. I think the EMT who picked you up was around and asking about you. Let me check on that. Would that be okay?"

Picked me up? I vaguely remembered an otter. I nodded again. "Sure." My voice sounded hoarse.

He called the nurse over and gave her some instructions while I fished through my wallet for the insurance card. I saw a the photo of myself and Henny in there as soon as I opened it, and stared at it for several seconds. My mind could find no link between myself and the happy foxes in that picture.

A few minutes later the nurse returned with a short, stocky otter in a yellow paramedic's uniform. He looked exhausted, as far as I could gauge such things, but he gave me a smile when he came in.

"This is Joey Slyde," the doctor said, and I realized that I'd never gotten the doctor's name. "Joey, Mr. Kyle's had a rough night. We'll be doing some

minor surgery, but he'll be okay. I just don't want to leave him alone."

"Sure," Joey said, and came down to sit next to me as the doctor left the room again, taking the insurance card I handed him.

Joey chattered along in a very reassuring otter-ish way. He was just finishing his first year as an EMT, and told me what I imagine he thought were some amusing anecdotes. I hope I chuckled at the appropriate times; really it was nice just to have a background into which I could slip and lose myself and stop thinking. Even lying on my stomach, the pain under my tail reminded me of the coyote. It seemed so long ago, and yet so immediate. My neck ached with the memory of his jaws, and then I imagined I could feel him behind me again, and I jumped.

"What? You okay?" Joey said.

I nodded. "Fine. Just jumpy. Sorry."

He looked at me sympathetically and patted my paw with his webbed fingers. "Hey, you're safe now. The worst is over."

I managed a smile, but the shadows in my mind whispered that he could not have been more wrong, and they whispered with the coyote's harsh voice.

When the doctor came back, Joey stood to leave. "Hey, is someone coming to get you?"

I stared blankly at him. "His wife," the doctor supplied gently, and I nodded, feeling stupid.

Joey squeezed my shoulder. "What's your wife look like?"

Remembering Henny was an effort. I opened my wallet and showed him the picture.

"She's really pretty." He smiled at me. "I'll watch out for her and stay there 'til you're ready to go."

I nodded, and managed another smile. "Thanks."

I don't want to go into the details of what happened with the doctor. They had a set of samples they had to take, which involved inserting long cotton-tipped wires into pretty much every orifice, taking a fur sample, combing out everywhere he might have touched to get some of his fur... It was like being raped again. And getting stitches down there was probably about as bad as you can imagine it being, even with local anaesthetic (they wouldn't knock me out).

At least the anaesthetic got rid of the pain, however temporarily. When it was over, the doctor gave me a list of foods to avoid until the stitches healed, and the card of a counseling center to go to. He'd been paged over the intercom in the middle of it, and now called back on the phone. "Right," I heard him say. "Send him on in." He turned to me and draped a sheet over me gently. "Sergeant Walker's here. He'll interview you, probably not too long, and then you can go. We've got all your paperwork taken care of here. Just sign it before you go. And here," he left a vial of pills on the table, "is something to soften your stool for a couple days. Keep the stitches from hurting too much."

"Okay. Thanks," I said.

The fox who walked in was a few inches taller than me. The doctor left after handing him a piece of paper. He scanned it, then sat down where Joey had been sitting.

"Mr. Kyle? I'm Jeff Walker." He leaned forward, letting me touch my nose to his in the traditional vulpine greeting. I hadn't realized how much I'd been trembling until I relaxed at the scent and sight of another fox.

"Hi," I said. "Thanks for coming."

He shrugged. "It's on my way," he said, but he, like Joey, looked exhausted. I could see the signs better on a fox: his ears and tail fought to stay up, and I saw him restrain a yawn more than once.

"Still. I don't think I could have made it to the station. I just..."

"Want to go home?" I hadn't said it because I didn't want to sound like an infant, but I nodded, startled. "Very common. Go home, re-establish the sense of security, get your life back on track."

Could it be that easy?

"I'd like to ask a few questions, and then I'll let you go. If you want to make a more complete statement, you can come down to the station tomorrow. Deal?"

I nodded.

"Okay. Where exactly in the park did the... assault take place?"

I described the edge of the park, the wall, the beginning of the path.

"And your attacker was a coyote?" I shivered, repressing the memory. He glanced at me, then went on from the doctor's notes when I didn't contradict him. "And the assault was... hm." I felt shame creeping back into my ears and chest. "Did he have a gun?"

"I... no, I don't think so."

"Knife?"

"No." Just his jaws and his... presence.

"Why didn't you run away?"

Because I was terrified. "I don't know."

He paused. "Are you gay?"

"No!"

"You didn't know your attacker?"

"No."

"About what time was the assault?"

"I don't know." We'd left the bar at just after midnight; Ryan had dropped me off at the park some fifteen minutes later. "Around 12:20, 12:30, something like that."

I was trembling again under the sheet. I didn't think he could see it, but he could probably smell the tension. "All right. I think that's enough. We generally have a problem with assaults in the park, but they're not of this nature." He stood up and put his notepad away. "I'll check it out. If you want to file a formal report, come down to the station tomorrow. I'll be there after noon."

"All right." I couldn't think of anything I'd less like to do.

"In the meantime, stay away from the park."

"I will." No need to worry about that. "Thanks again. For coming."

He smiled. "Glad to help."

When he was gone, I put my pants on gingerly. The anaesthetic made it a lot easier. I signed the paperwork, shoved it and the pills into a pocket, and left.

Henny was waiting with Joey in the waiting area when I walked stiffly out. She ran to me and grabbed me in a hug, and it was all I could do to keep from pushing her away immediately. As it was, I shuddered and tensed, and she stepped back, ears flattening.

"Oh, Gods, Bret, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you? I was just so relieved to see you. Are you all right? I can't believe it, when they called I didn't know what to do and then you weren't here and they said you were still with the doctor..." I finally succeeded in disengaging myself from her and stood there awkwardly while she chattered on. She didn't stop until Joey stood up.



"You going to be okay, Mr. Kyle?"

No.

"Sure he will, Joey. Thanks so much for waiting with me. We'll just head on home now."

"You need your car towed back from where it is?" This he directed to me.

I shook my head. "I didn't drive tonight. Thanks a lot, Joey."

He waved a paw. "All in the line of duty."

★ ★ ★

Henny tried to draw me out several times on the way home, but I'd already determined that I wouldn't tell her what had happened — if she knew, it would become more real instead of remaining my private nightmare. I told her I'd been mugged and that they'd wrenched my tailbase throwing me to the ground, and the doctor was concerned I might have a concussion. She wasn't satisfied with that, but I didn't budge. She was sensitive enough to tell that more was wrong, and she believed that nothing was so bad that sharing it wouldn't make it better, that there was no burden she couldn't ease. I used to love that about her.

When we went to bed, she tried to put her arm around me and I squirmed away from it. She lay in hurt silence, and I was sorry for that, but there was nothing I could do. I couldn't stand to be touched, and I couldn't tell her why. I felt like an impostor. She had gone to the hospital to find her husband and had returned with this weak creature that was something less than a fox. I lay in bed, miserable, praying for sleep to come. When it did, I wished it hadn't.

I have never had as vivid a nightmare as I had that night. I watched Ryan's car drive away, and looked up. I felt I could count every star in my dream sky. The park grass was cool under my feet, the wind nice against my bare chest fur, and the smells of the park rich on the breeze.

This time, though, the smell of the coyote was mixed in and everywhere, acrid and vicious. I turned around, panicking, and knew that if I could only climb the wall, I could get away from him. I put my paws to the cold stone, but somehow I couldn't make myself climb. He walked up casually behind me, not running, and grabbed me by the throat. I felt hot fire under my tail and then Henny was shaking me and I was moaning in a low, guttural voice that frightened me almost more than the dream.

I struck her paws away and stared at her for the moment it took me to get my bearings. I could still feel the ache under my tail and realized that the anaesthetic had worn off. The nightmare lingered in my head as I threw the sheets aside, staggered to the bathroom, and threw up.

"Bret," Henny was saying, "it was just a dream, it can't hurt you, please come back to bed." She stopped talking when she heard me vomit.

I looked at myself in the mirror. The dream was still fresh in my mind. Why couldn't I make myself climb the wall? I'm no psychiatrist, but I knew what the dream was telling me. The attack was my fault. I could've gotten away if I'd run faster, or struggled more.

"Bret?"

I padded back to the bed and touched my nose to Henny's. "Sorry, Hen," I said softly. "I'm not feeling so good."

"Want me to make some chicken broth for you?"

"No." The thought of eating made me even more sick. "I'll just try to sleep it off."

It took me a long time to find a sleeping position that didn't make the stitches hurt. When I did, my sleep was uneasy, but I didn't remember any more nightmares.



Henny was gone when I woke up. She'd left me a note, the gist of which was that she'd turned off my alarm and called in sick for me, and left some chicken broth in the microwave. She also said she'd check on me at lunch. Her department store job was twenty minutes away, so that was considerably out of the way for her. I thought about calling and telling her not to bother. Then I felt guilty about that, considering all she'd done, and decided I'd try to be nice to her for the half hour she was going to be back.

I wasn't feeling nice, that was the problem. I plodded into the bathroom and drew myself a bath and soaked there for a good 45 minutes. They'd cleaned me up at the hospital, but I still felt dirty, and I scrubbed myself until I was almost sore, all except under my tail. I still couldn't bring myself to touch there. The sense of violation was still strong in my mind, and reminded me somewhat of the time my car had been broken into. After that, it didn't feel safe for months, but at least I could feel safe when I wasn't in it. Now my body had been violated, and there was no escape for me.

I finally gave up the bath, threw some pants on, and went downstairs. The smell of the chicken broth was something less than appealing, so I just sat on the sofa, turned the TV on, and ignored it while I brooded.

The phone rang at about 10:30. Like most people, I'm conditioned very strongly to answer it, so after the second ring I reached over despite myself and hit the speaker pickup.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Bret. It's Ryan. What's up? You didn't look that drunk when I dropped you off."

"No. I'm just...not feeling well."

"Oh. Hold on." I heard him talking to Mary, our office manager, about some client order. Ryan is a customer analyst supervisor — if you call our office to book a trip and aren't happy with your service and ask to talk to the supervisor, likely you'll get Ryan on the phone. Like Henny, he's intuitive and sensitive, which is a real asset in his job. Unfortunately, he's an all white red fox — not an arctic fox, a red fox — and he has the strangest blue eyes. Coupled with his intuition, his appearance has led some people to speculate privately that he might be "touched" or psychic somehow, and to keep away from him. I don't believe in any of that. He's a good friend, a good drinking buddy, and until this phone call, it hadn't mattered that he's also gay.



"Sorry about that," he said. "I hope you'll be better for the Dragons game."

The Dragons game. I felt like it wasn't me who'd made those arrangements. It had been some other fox, excited at the seats — lower level, 40-yard line — but he was gone, and I didn't think I could handle the press of people and the noise and scents. "I don't think so, Ryan. I'm sorry."

"What? What's the matter?"

Ryan could keep a secret, and had a couple of mine still under lock and key, as I had a couple of his. I could be sure that what I told him wouldn't get around the office, but there was no way I was going to tell him the truth, either, especially over the phone. He wouldn't understand what it's like for a

straight guy. That bitterness seeped into my words, though I tried to keep it out.

"I got mugged in the park last night."

"What??"

"I'm still a bit shaken up by it."

"Oh, Bret, I knew I should've driven you to your house. Oh, man. What happened?"

He was feeling guilty, and I'd known he would, and I didn't say anything to let him off the hook. The more guilt for him, the less for me. "This guy jumped me. I got a little banged up, had to go to the hospital."

"You're kidding. I shouldn't have let you... I had a feeling."

"I'm sure I'll be okay. I'll be in on Monday."

He sighed. "All right. If there's anything I can do, please, let me know."

The call waiting went off. "I will, Ryan. Thanks. I got another call — talk to you later, okay?"

"Yeah. Get well, Bret," he said softly.

The call that was waiting was from Sergeant Walker. "I'm glad I caught you, Mr. Kyle," he said. "I wanted to talk to you before you came down here."

I hadn't been planning to go to the police station. I just wanted to forget this and get my life back to normal. "Uh-huh?"

He paused. "Were you planning to file a report?"

I paused, too. I figured I should cover my bases. "I hadn't decided."

"I'd recommend you not."

I didn't really need to ask, but I wanted to hear. "Why not?"

"Look, Mr. Kyle, I'm not talking as a policeman now. I'm talking as a fellow fox. You know that there are certain myths that fly around about us. Most people know they aren't true, but they can get in the way of a case sometimes." I didn't say anything, and after a moment he went on. "I want to tell you up front that I believe you are completely the victim in this. But the fact that you're a male, for one thing, and a fox, and you weren't wearing a shirt — "

"Lots of people go topless around here. There's only one or two months where you can't."

He sighed. "I know that. I'm just saying it adds to the problem. Then there's also..." He stopped.

I knew what he was going to say. My stomach fur. "Don't worry. Sergeant. I won't file anything."

"Mr. Kyle, I know this sucks. I'll keep my eyes open, and if there's anything I can do..."

"Thanks."

In my mind, as I hung up, I heard the coyote laughing.



I didn't seem to be able to do much after that. I sat on the sofa, replaying the incident over and over, no matter how much I wanted to forget it. The niggling suspicion had grown in my mind that it was my fault it had happened. I remembered the doctor asking if I were gay, and he'd certainly put my answer in his notes — yet the sergeant had asked, too. All my replays of that incident now had that tinge to them, and that was part of what had made me more curt than I wanted to be with Ryan. I started to get the notion that the coyote had seen me with him and assumed I was gay, and that it was therefore partly Ryan's fault, too. Of course, Ryan didn't have any pink triangles or rainbows on his car, and he wasn't flaming by any stretch of the imagination, so that whole idea was ridiculous, but that didn't stop me.

Henny came home for lunch, and was rather distressed to see that I hadn't touched the chicken broth. She insisted on heating it up for me while she made herself a sandwich. I tried to be personable, and managed reasonably well until she had finished her sandwich and I had choked down maybe three spoonfuls of the broth. She got very upset and said she was going to wait until I'd finished it before she went back to work, and I replied acidly that I thought the store was closed on Sunday. Eventually, I ate a few more spoonfuls and she left, unsatisfied. I poured the rest of the broth down the drain.

Ryan called again in the afternoon. "I just wanted to know if I could bring anything over on my way home."

"No, I'm fine."

He paused. "Look, Bret, I'm sorry. If I'd known — "

"You didn't, okay? And neither did I."

"Right." He sighed. "Okay, I'll see you Monday. Get better soon."

"Thanks," I said insincerely, but as soon as he hung up I started to feel bad instead of angry. I knew I was screwed up inside and taking it out on Ryan, which he didn't deserve. I paced about that for five minutes and then dialed his number, but he didn't answer. Of course, that made me just feel worse about myself, and I curled up depressed on the sofa until Henny got home.

I still didn't want to eat, but I knew I had to and I was actually hungry. I tried to make things up with Henny and actually ate most of what she prepared for me. I was still nervous about being touched, but I made it through a couple hugs. When we went to bed, she was feeling a little better and made some amorous overtures, but I had no desire for her and told her I didn't feel well. To be honest, I had no desire for anyone.

The coyote caught me in my dreams again, and again I woke up terrified, ran to the bathroom, and threw up. Again, it took me a long time to get back to sleep. The stitches didn't hurt as much, but they were still uncomfortable. More uncomfortable was the fact that I was still depressed, sick, and frightened, and I wasn't getting any better.



The weekend was mostly dismal. It took me until Sunday afternoon to get up the nerve to call the counseling center on the card the doctor had given me, mainly because it was called the "Women's Crisis Support Center." I also had to do it from outside the home, because I didn't want Henny to hear me or notice the number on the phone records if she were to examine them. Yes, I was paranoid. Henny certainly had no history of examining the phone records, but I guess it was not out of the question if she thought I was acting oddly.

When I called, though, the young woman who answered was very hostile because I was male, and to my circuitous inquiries about the services they provided, she replied archly that they preferred for the victim to call and inquire herself. I gathered all my courage and said that I was the victim. She accused me of abusing their services to get myself off, and hung up.

There were a couple points during the weekend when I started to feel better, but they didn't last, and it always got worse at night. I couldn't be

near a window on the ground floor, and going outside was out of the question. I kept smelling the coyote's rank odor, though I knew it was all in my head. However, I was worried that if I went outside, I wouldn't be able to sense him coming because of that. In my paranoid state, I convinced myself that he could've gone through my wallet and gotten my address.

Of course, I couldn't tell Henny any of this, which distressed her because I'd changed and she didn't know why. I tried to make her feel better, but I couldn't conceal the fact that I wasn't the fox I had been, and I hated trying to deceive her into thinking I was still a strong, masculine husband. On the other paw, I couldn't tell her I wasn't. It was a nasty dilemma and I couldn't see my way out of it.

I wanted to be that fox again, goodness knows. I wanted to be cruising through life with a good house, good job and a good wife, enjoying sports on the weekends, playing the occasional round of golf (with friends) or tennis (with the wife). That fox was innocent and happy, padding about the world feeling invincible. He had dreams of a bright future, but they'd been killed Thursday night and cast away like an old pair of pants. Now he was me, and all I had was nightmares, though at least they became more abstract and I didn't throw up again.

All in all, it was almost a relief to go back to work on Monday. I walked slowly through the office. The smells, the textures, the furniture all seemed familiar yet oddly distant, as though I hadn't been there in a year. It was that other fox who'd worked here, and I was just coming in to take his place. Sitting at my desk, I looked around at the picture of Henny, the cartoon I'd clipped, the news articles, and all the other things that made the workspace mine, and my chest tightened up. I kept thinking that the last time I'd been here, I had no idea what was going to happen to me. They seemed like landmarks of a more innocent time, the more so because I hadn't been in my office since before the assault. I saw myself sliding down a dark hole, looking desperately back at a receding light.

I guess Ryan had told the guys to go easy on me. I was handled with kid gloves, asked if I could handle the work, and generally tiptoed around. Ryan himself came over around 9:30.

"Hi," he said, keeping a cautious distance.

I looked up and into his sky-blue eyes. "Hi, Ryan."

"How you feeling?"

I shook my head. "Not good. But staying home would be worse. I need to get busy."

"I know how that is," he said, and I thought, *you can't possibly*. "It's good to see you back."

I managed a wan smile. "Thanks. I'm...I'm sorry about Friday. I was—"

He held up a paw. "You were stressed. It's okay. Want some coffee?"

I shook my head. "But thanks."

He told me a bit about the football game, and I nodded politely, but couldn't manage to be conversational. When he asked me to join him for lunch, I declined. Not only wasn't I hungry, I was so relieved at the escape through my work that I didn't want to stop. The numbers, the computer — they didn't judge me. I threw myself into them. I had other responsibilities, too, and among them was helping train a new guy. Mike had been assigned to me because he was a fox, too, and we'd been getting along pretty well, but I begged off continuing his training. I wanted to isolate myself.



Mike was puzzled, but I explained that it wasn't him, that I needed to catch up on my work and I felt he already had a good grasp of our procedures. I said he should feel free to ask me whenever he had a question, and made sure to emphasize that, because he was pretty shy and I knew that coming to ask me wouldn't be his first choice in dealing with a problem.

As long as I stayed buried in my work, I was fine. If I got distracted, or heard an unfamiliar noise, my head would shoot up and I would panic, thinking the coyote was back. That only happened a couple times, and by the end of the day I felt as good as I'd felt since the attack. Of course, that only lasted until I got home.

★ ★ ★

That was how I spent the next six months of my life. I withdrew from everyone, at work and at home. The friends at the tennis club, my colleagues at work, my family — I felt too ashamed of myself to talk to them. There didn't seem to be anywhere I could turn; even the support center had spurned me. That just made me feel worse, because I thought that I was the only man who'd ever been raped. Intellectually, I knew that was silly, but emotionally it felt true, and so I came to believe it.

Most of the people at work respected my withdrawal. After all, I was still doing good work. My manager talked to me a couple times, but I insisted I was just trying to focus on work. Actually, there was another problem at work that I definitely couldn't bring up to him.

In a travel agency, for some reason, pretty much any of the employees who aren't married are gay. Ryan was far from the only one, and the office in general had a pretty open atmosphere. Mike, for instance, wore a pride ring necklace and had told me that he had taken this job because of the daytime hours, so he could spend more time with his boyfriend.

My thinking at the time was that the more I associated with gays, the more gay I became. I tried to fight that — I realized it was stupid — but every time I talked to Ryan or Mike or any of my other gay co-workers, all I could think of was the coyote, and how they lived every day with what he'd done to me. And they liked it! It made me feel vastly uncomfortable. I tried to overcome it, I really did, but I couldn't.

Mike got the hint soon enough, though he was confused at my insistence that he ask me about work-related issues and my reluctance to spend time talking about anything else. Ryan was another story. He refused to leave me alone without being annoying about it. I resented his intrusion into my solitude, but to my surprise, I found myself at lunch with him once or twice. I almost felt I wanted to tell him my secret. After all, he was used to having people stare at him and think he's different. I thought that of anyone, he might be best able to sympathize with me. But I couldn't get past his orientation, and so I never spoke up.

I can't even remember specifically when Henny left. She went on for a month or so about how she couldn't take it, but quietly — histrionics weren't her strong suit. She didn't have a sense of the dramatic, either, so when she had decided she really couldn't take it, she wrote me a note, packed her things, and left while I was at work. This drove me deeper into depression,

because I couldn't get around it being my fault. I still loved her, but I couldn't be the fox she wanted me to be, or that I wanted to be for her.

What I remember more clearly is that Ryan asked me to lunch the next day and wouldn't take no for an answer. I ended up telling him that she'd left, and when he asked why, I said, "She couldn't live with me the way I am. Could you blame her?" He just looked at me sadly with those bright blue eyes, and that was when I was closest to telling him the whole story.

Throughout this time, I remained afraid of the nighttime, an intolerable state for a fox. Henny and I used to love to take nighttime walks in the park. Everything is so different then, cool and subtle, and you can get a better sense of the world. Light and scent and sound all balance, unlike the daytime when harsh sunlight drowns out everything else. Now the night held nothing for me but the coyote.

He remained on my mind. I felt almost closer to him than to anyone else I knew; at least, I spent more time thinking about him. Why me? What had I done? Did I look like I wanted it? He must've seen something weak in me. I grew to hope I'd meet him again, though I was still terrified of him, just so I could ask him "Why me?" He loomed in my thoughts and my dreams, behind every shadow and every noise, and though his scent eventually faded in my nostrils, I never completely lost it.



One night, the pressure and the pain went beyond what I could bear. I'd been drinking, and I decided that I was going to go find the damn coyote and ask him why, then beg him to kill me and end this miserable excuse for a life. I went back to the park, sniffing around like a mad fox. There were usually a few foxes, bats, and raccoons walking around every night, but tonight the park was empty. There was no moon in the sky, and a hush was upon that darkest night.

My ears listened for every squeak; my whiskers trembled with every breath of wind. I jumped every time some small animal ran through the bushes ahead of me, and even when the little bats squeaked overhead. Every noise and scent seemed to be a harbinger of the coyote. Drunk and half-crazed, I sought out the shadows eagerly, my heart beating overtime with fear and a wild sense that the empty charade of my life might soon be over.

There was no sign of him. I retraced the same ground a dozen times and ended up by the wall howling, "Where are you?? Come get me!" I had enough wits about me to quiet down and hide when the blue and red lights flashed through the leaves, but it wasn't until it started raining at about 3 a.m. that I went home, broken and defeated. I felt worse; felt that even the coyote had no more use for me, and I walked around the house sinking deeper into depression, even though the alcohol had worn off. Even the oblivion of sleep wouldn't come to me.

I would not wish on my worst enemy the state of mind I was in at that moment. The house was eerie, lonely, and dark, and I wandered through it, not needing lights to see and refusing to turn them on for comfort. When I arrived in the kitchen, the knives on the wall gleamed enticingly with what little light there was. I took one down—not the largest; that would be overkill. With its silver point, I ruffled the fur on my wrists, looking at how the silver disappeared into the black. Just a little further, and all this would be over. The scrape of the metal against my skin felt like salvation. I left the kitchen and went upstairs to run my last warm bath.

The doorbell rang as I was reaching for the faucet.

I hesitated. Who would be out in the rain at this hour? It rang again.

Growling, I put the knife on the bathroom sink, then thought of the coyote. Maybe he had come back for me, finally. I picked up the knife again and went downstairs. I threw open the front door.

Ryan was there, his white fur soaked by the rain. His ears and whiskers were dripping, but his ice blue eyes were warm. I stared at him, completely at a loss.

"May I come in?" he said gently. I nodded.

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "What are you doing here?" I whispered.

He took my paw, the one still clutching the knife, and drew a claw gently along my wrist. His eyes met mine. "You needed me," he said quietly.

I shuddered and felt my legs give way under me. The knife clattered to the floor. He shed his raincoat and guided me to the couch, where he sat next to me, putting his arm around me.



My eyes were filling with tears and my throat felt choked by them. His fur was so warm as I pressed into it that I couldn't believe he'd been out in the rain. "How?" I managed to croak.

He rocked me and nuzzled my ears gently, pausing. "I had a dream. I dreamed you were in a high tower. You were standing at the window and there was something huge, black, and evil behind you. I yelled at you not to jump, but you didn't hear me. I ran for the base of the tower just as you jumped out — and then I woke up. I tried calling, but you didn't answer. So I came over here. To catch you."

"A dream?" I shivered, the tears flowing more freely now. "You came here because of a dream?"

He spoke softly, and slowly. "I have learned that there are certain dreams I should not ignore."

"Then you are..."

"No. Maybe." He sighed. "I prefer to think that I have a very perceptive and active subconscious that sends me important messages from time to time. I've never had cause to regret listening."

I caught sight of the knife on the floor and shuddered again. Suddenly, the thought of what I'd been about to do was terrifying rather than comforting. "I think you saved my life," I said.

He rubbed my ears gently. "What could be so terrible? What evil thing could be that frightening?" I hesitated, and he said, "You don't have to tell me, of course. But I'm good at listening and I won't judge you."

I nodded. "Give me a moment." I was horrified and drained by where I'd just been. I couldn't imagine that telling my secret would be as terrible as that, and Ryan was making me feel very safe. Even being gay, or being a laughingstock, would be better than continuing what I was going through.

I took a deep breath and looked down. "That evil thing... was a coyote. The night you dropped me off, the night I was mugged... he did more than mug me." I felt his paw tighten on my shoulder, but he let me talk. "I saw him walking, but didn't think anything of it until he grabbed me by the throat. His jaws..." I winced and rubbed my neck. "I thought he was just mugging me. He felt my wallet — that's what I thought at first. He put an arm across my throat then and said... said... how... much he was going to enjoy me." I didn't even realize I was crying again until the tears dripped

onto my paws. "He reached down and got my pants off, forced me to take them all the way off..."

"Shh," he said softly. "You don't have to — "

I pressed on. It had been bottled up for so long that it was pouring out and I couldn't stop it. "He forced me down, forced himself... into me... and reached around and grabbed me too. And..." I gulped back a sob. "I came, that was the worst part, I came like I enjoyed it!!"

"Shhhh..." he said soothingly.

I was shaking, tears pouring down my muzzle. "And when it was over... he was tied... and just forced himself out and left me. I needed stitches. And there was nobody to talk to."

"Gods, Bret," he said softly, holding me.

I pressed against him and cried for a good five minutes. The sense of relief was overwhelming, but I was also tired and ashamed. When the tears slowed, I wiped my eyes and glanced up at him. His eyes and muzzle were showing only pity and understanding.

"So..." I hesitated to ask the next question. He let me take my time. "Am I... am I gay?"

Ryan let out a short bark of laughter and then immediately composed himself. "I'm sorry, Bret. Gay? I can't tell you that. There's only one person who can."

I looked down again. "I don't know. I didn't enjoy it, but I... physically... you know. The doctor kept asking me if I was. I didn't want to be, but I didn't know."

"I know someone you should talk to," he said. "He's a friend of mine, and he was raped too."

"Is he gay?"

He hesitated. "Well, yeah. But he was before. Listen, Bret, if a lesbian is raped by a man, does that make her straight?"

"How would I know?"

"My point is... that wasn't a choice you made, and it's been haunting you for months. Rape isn't about sex, it's about power, and that coyote might not have been any more gay than you. You didn't have a gay experience; you were assaulted and raped. That doesn't change your orientation."

The relief from that worry didn't come in a wave, as had the feeling of unburdening myself; rather, it felt like a small flame gradually growing and

fighting back the darkness. "You know," I said, wiping my muzzle again, "I knew that some of the things I was thinking were silly, but there was nobody else there... just knowing I'm not alone, that there are other people it happens to, makes a huge difference."

He nodded. "It's a very brave thing you did, telling me. I think that may be what saves your life, not me. Once it's out, that secret won't keep poisoning you inside."

I felt good enough to support myself, so I sat back away from him, panting and curling my tail around me. "Thanks, Ryan."

"I'll call my friend first thing in the morning. Do you want me to stay in the house with you 'til then?"

I hesitated, not wanting to seem too desperate for his company. In the pause while I was thinking, I yawned hugely.

He chuckled. "Let me walk you upstairs. I'll sit in the room until you fall asleep, then I'll go home."

"That sounds good." All my nervous energy was gone, and all at once I wasn't sure whether I could even make it upstairs.

I slept through the night and woke without that vague uneasy feeling that comes from unremembered bad dreams. When I woke, at ten in the morning, the sun was shining through the window, and for the first time in months, I smiled.

Epilogue

Ryan's friend Charles was very friendly and open about his experience, which had been with a stranger he met in a bar. He talked to me by himself for a week, then took me to the counselor who'd helped him. Gradually, I came out of my shell. I was able to tell Henny what had happened to me. There were tears on both sides, but it was a good experience. We decided that we still loved each other, but I didn't want to subject Henny to my continuing neuroses, and she didn't want to deal with all the issues I would have, so we got an amicable divorce.

I met a lovely, shy vixen named Angel at the shelter my counselor was affiliated with. Angel had been beaten and psychologically abused by her husband for three years before getting up the courage to walk out on him. She and I started out going for long walks, and eventually graduated to

holding paws. Both of us were very hesitant about being touched, but we have hope that we can overcome that. Sometimes, when I heard her stories about what her husband did, I felt ashamed of my problems. How can one brutal night compare to three years of suffering? She laughed lightly every time I said that, and just replied that it's not a contest.

A little more than a year after my attack, I got a call from Sgt. Walker. He wanted me to come down to the station. Wouldn't say why, but it wasn't hard to guess.

"Are you going to go?" Angel said. "I think I should."

She demurred. "Dr. Caralian advises against confrontation."

"I'm not going to confront anyone. I just want to see him if he's there. He probably won't even know me."

I was just reaching for the phone to call Ryan when she said, "Why don't you call Ryan?" We both laughed and touched noses.

Ryan wasn't sure it was a good idea, either. "It's what you want to do that counts, though. If you want to go, then do it. Want me along?"

"Yeah. I'd like that, if you can make it."

"Sure. Mind if Josh comes? He'll wait in the car." Josh was Ryan's boyfriend. I'd met him a couple times. Nice fox, and perfect for Ryan: stable and reserved.

"No, that's fine."

We met Sgt. Walker at the police station. I wouldn't have remembered him; I didn't remember most details of that night. He knew me, though, and held out his paw when he saw me. With very little hesitation, I shook it.

"You've probably guessed why I called you. We're holding a large coyote who's a rape/murder suspect. The victim was a vixen." Angel's ears flattened. "His...language...indicates that he may have a psychosis centered on foxes."

I nodded, feeling the fur on the back of my neck stand up. "Where is he?"

He held up a paw. "Just a second. Let me explain how we're going to do this. We don't want him to know you're here. We've got an observation room with one-way glass and a forced-convection vent so you can see and smell him, but he can't see or smell you. We don't want a confrontation; we don't want any contact at all. We just want identification."

"Right." I was a little disappointed, I guess, but I knew it would be better that way.

The scent in the observation room hit me like a slap in the face. It was nearly exactly as I'd remembered it: powerful, rank, and unmistakable. Angel squeezed my paw, and I recovered quickly. I had no doubt about his identity, so when I stepped up to the glass, it was only to see him more clearly than I ever had except in dreams.



He sat at the table looking bored, smaller than I remembered him, but still large enough to tower over me. In my dreams he'd sometimes attained heights of ten or eleven feet, but he was nowhere near that in reality, of

course. I estimated that he would be six feet and a few inches, about a foot taller than me. His fur was dirty light brown, and his underfur was light grey. He had a predatory cast to his features that I couldn't quite put my finger on—maybe the canines that protruded further than normal over his lips, or the narrowed eyes, or the sneer to the muzzle.

"Ugh," was all Ryan said.

Angel looked really frightened. "You're lucky to be alive, Bret," she whispered. I squeezed her paw back.

"That's him," I said to Walker, who had followed us in. "Do you have enough to put him away?"

He nodded. "I think so. We've got blood, fur, and a witness." His expression indicated that he would, by the gods, make sure that was enough.

"Good." We filed back out of the room. Behind us, the coyote barked. I winced at the sound, but it was less threatening here than in my mind, and already I felt that he was losing what was left of his power over me. "Thanks for calling me," I said to Walker on the way out.

"No problem," he smiled. "You seem to be doing okay."

"It was touch and go for a while there," I said, and then a thought occurred to me. "Listen. If you'd be open to it, I'd like to come back here and talk to some of the officers — well, maybe not me, but a trained counselor — about how to deal with male... rape victims." The word still took an effort to choke out, though not as much as it once had.

He thought about that. "We have a general rape handling session coming up next month. Maybe we could arrange it as an addition to that?"

"That'd be great. I'll have someone call you?"

"Here, have them call Sgt. Franklin. She handles all that." He scribbled a number on a piece of paper and handed it to me.

"Thanks." He smiled and waved as we walked out.

"See, that wasn't so bad," I said when we got back to our cars. The others just smiled, and Angel touched my shoulder.

"Feel like getting some dinner?" Ryan said.

Angel nodded, but I said, "Actually, could we stop at the park first?"



We sat atop the wall, facing west. Ryan and Josh had their arms around each other, and Angel and I held paws. Together we sat and watched the brilliant orange and red streaks in the sky fade to dusky blue and deep violet as the sun set.

And I did not fear the night.



Werewolves Anonymous

Lanny Fields

"Mary, this has to be just about the dumbest thing you've ever dragged me to..."

Mary rolled her eyes mockingly at Jason as the two were walking down the sidewalk, the soft blare of city life humming all around them. Mary looked younger than Jason, although, in her own words, "I'm older in all the ways that count." She had red hair that she always seemed to be fiddling with, and crisp green eyes that shone like tiny emeralds. Jason was a bit less remarkable, with slightly disheveled long hair and a couple day's growth of beard, sometimes called the "nineties scruff look."

"No, Mary, I'm serious. This sounds utterly dumb. I mean, really, just what am I supposed to do in there? Is this like AA, or something? Twelve step recovery?"

"No, not exactly... no, it's more like a 'coping' seminar. And I say, it's about time. You'd be surprised how many folks like us think the best way to deal with the problem is to shut yourself off from the world, and from the folks who know you. Doesn't work. Never has worked."

"Well, yeah, I know, but... well, it just sounds a little hokey. Just a bit."

"What can I say? Support groups always do seem hokey, don't they?" The two of them stopped at a crosswalk, waiting patiently for the lights to turn in their favor. "Just isn't right to talk about support groups and caring and sharing and opening up in the super-cynical New Millennium, or whatever we're calling it..."

"Well... yeah." Jason mused on that—it did seem kind of wimpish to talk about your feelings, even though that's what nice, turn of the century folk were supposed to do. He chalked it up to more cultural influence, from sitcoms mostly — because only on a sitcom could a joke about someone's personal problems win an award. But still, you couldn't help the way you felt...

"Couple more blocks. At the church." The light turned white, and they stepped across, eyes wary for traffic.

Jason laughed softly. "A church? Isn't that inviting something bad to happen?"

"That's vampires you're thinking of. We're werewolves, remember?"

Jason nodded. "Right, yes... it just seems funny."



"Well, here we are. Now, I've just got to run to the cash machine across the street and handle a couple bills. It's room 23. Meeting starts in about ten minutes."

"Right." Jason waved to Mary as she crossed the street towards the convenience store, and then he slowly turned around, staring up at the church.

And up. And up further still. It was one of the old-school churches, which had the philosophy of "architectural size is proportionate to the amount of holiness herein." There were just a couple rooms in the basement which the various support groups used on varying nights, with varying degrees of success.

He walked into the church, and glanced around inside, noticing the sign:

A.A. Meeting: Room 32

Free and Clear: 23

Coping with Cancer: 21

What to Do When Your Teenager Laughs in Your Face: 17, 18, 22, 24

He proceeded down into the basement, and a few curt glances later, found his room.

"Free and Clear." He didn't feel like either. Not since the encounter with Mary, late one night in a smoke-ridden bar, full of exposed lie and false promise. The two of them had hit it off fairly well, and before long, things had progressed to his personal favorite part of the relationship, the "mad sex" bit. Closely followed by his least favorite part, the "girlfriend turns into humanoid vixen, nibbles on your neck" bit, which up to that point he hadn't known existed but was now on the top of his list of bad things.

Oh, she'd felt terrible about it. She'd kept a pretty good handle on it for a very long time, and it really tore her up to have lost control, dragging Jason into the whole lycanthrope scene before he was really ready for it... but after a while, they'd figured out that feeling bad about what was already done wasn't going to do either of them a lot of good.

Mary dismissed chains and cages, saying that they were too "last century." What she'd meant by that, he didn't know. Mary was pretty closed about her age, but she'd probably been around for a long time, thanks to her werewolf regeneration abilities. Instead she suggested going to a group like this one, which would help him to come to terms with his lycanthropy, and in time, retain clear cognitive thought when in either form. Mary had promised him some pretty interesting sex once he got a handle on his inner beast, and as far as Jason was concerned, sooner was better.

He pushed open the door. The group stopped talking a bit as he slipped in, grabbing a name tag and a cup of coffee. They resumed talking in hushed tones he couldn't hear very well. He walked over, sipping his drink carefully as he chose a seat and began to listen.

One guy — Ron, his name was — was talking. "Well, yes, sometimes it's tough, you just want to, y'know... just give in. Yeah, it's tough, but I just have to remember little Josie, and that... time... that I grabbed her arm just after losing my temper, and broke it... Jesus, one dose of that, and it all goes away..." Ron's face was crunched up in emotion, and Jason felt the bottom start to drop out from his heart.

Scattered claps rang through the hall. The leader of the group — Chris, according to his tag — stood up and placed a hand on Ron's shoulder. "Everyone... let's thank Ron here, for sharing with us."

"Thanks, Ron." "Thank you, Ron." Soft voices, sullen — they didn't seem to be too happy with the cards they'd been dealt in life. Jason shifted uncomfortably — Mary was running late, and he didn't want to be here alone for too long. He wasn't quite ready for this...

"Now, then. I believe Linda has something she'd like to say?"

Linda — at least, that was her name tag — stood up, and walked sullenly towards the center of the room. Jason wondered to himself just what she turned into. Linda was 60 or 70 or so, and she didn't look like the type to suddenly shift into a wolf or a fox or a jaguar. Maybe a bear? Possibly...

Mary said that wolves were the most common, but not the only ones out there. Mary herself was a fox creature.

Jason thought on it as Linda spoke. Maybe a cougar, or a tabby cat... it would fit the psychological profile, which was what lycanthropy was based off of...

"My name is Linda and I... I'm an alcoholic."

Jason snapped awake. Around the room, everyone echoed: "Hi, Linda." He glanced backwards towards the door, and nearly kicked himself – because sure enough, there it was. Alcoholics Anonymous. Room 32, as opposed to the one he was *supposed* to be in, room 23...

Jason bit his lip. How the heck did you skip out on an A.A. meeting? He didn't have a beeper, or a cell-phone, or anything... he could just take off, but it'd look bad. What was he supposed to do?

Linda talked for a bit, as Jason's mind went into advanced vapor lock, coming up with more and more ridiculous ideas for escape. Fake a heart attack. Start screaming about how badly he wanted booze. Say something about how, oh, God, he was missing the final episode of Felicity. Anything...

Chris was headed his way. Linda was done. Crap, Linda was done, and Chris was heading this way, and what the heck was Jason supposed to say? Just say to him, 'Hey, sorry, but I think I'm in the wrong group?'

"Hey! Jason! You're in the wrong group!"

Jason craned his neck — Mary was poking her head through the door. She motioned for him. "Free and Clear, bud. Move!"



"You just **had** to mention the name of a famous brand of beer, didn't you?"

"Well, I didn't think they'd all start glazing over on me... here." She held the door open. "Age before beauty..."

"Quit holding the door, then, and step through."

Mary rolled her eyes. "You're a pain in the ass. A very badly behaved boyfriend. Go in."

Jason nodded, and stepped into the room, blinking slightly... he was almost sure that he'd stepped back into the A.A. room by mistake. The folks

here ran the demographic gamut, from old to young, all races, both known genders. And all rather sullen, a bit haunted... faraway looks in their eyes.

Mary whispered in his ear. "Most of these folks have just been changed, and they aren't quite sure how to handle it. Not everyone who spreads lycanthropy is nice enough to stick around afterwards to tell you how to deal with it."

"But you had to stick around. I owed you twelve bucks."

"Yes, that's it. Only reason I stuck around. C'mon, they're about to start." Mary and Jason walked over to the circle, pulling chairs away and sitting down softly.

No name tags here. Guess they took anonymity more seriously than the folks at the A.A. meeting did. After a few moments, a young guy with a black T-shirt on, stood up to speak. He looked like the ferret type, though Jason couldn't figure out just why...

"Hello. My name's Gerald, and I'm an alcoholic."

Nearly every eyeball in the room blinked in unison. Gerald continued. "I can taste gin in my dreams. I used to think it was like honey mixed with coca-cola, only better. I used to deny I had a problem, but then after I wrapped my car around a telephone pole, I figured I should go here. And I swear, I'm gonna pick up a white chip and then whatever chip comes after that..."

Another man stood up. "Uhm, Gerald, the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting's across the hall."

Gerald blinked. "It is? Oh, right, room 32. Sorry. What group's this?"

The man looked around for a second, at everyone's suspicious stares. He looked back at Gerald, and spoke. "Blood disease."

"Oh. Sorry. I'll be on my way..." Gerald picked his coat off the chair, and hurried out of the room — if he had been a werewolf, his tail would have been between his legs.

The man nodded. "I guess that settles that. Anyone else here for A.A.?"

With the groan and rumble of chairs being freed of weight, four or five more people got up, grabbing their jackets and issuing a few muted apologies. They ambled out of the room as well.

The group's mouthpiece sighed. "Every time..." He turned to face the group. "Well, then. Hello, my name is Phillip, and I am not an alcoholic, I

don't have cancer, and my teenager knows better than to laugh in my face. I am, however, a werewolf."

"Hi, Phillip," chorused everyone, with the exception of Jason, his brain overloaded with too much weirdness for the night. Mary elbowed him, whispering something about being courteous.

Phillip continued, his voice taking on the faint sound of repetitious memory. "I am a werewolf, and that is part of who I am, but that is not the whole part, nor the largest part. Not for me, not for anyone in this room. And the purpose of this group is to let everyone here realize that... that we draw strength and courage and blah... from the bonds we forge blah... each other in the blah... journey through blah..."

The man's speech faded into background noise as Jason drifted a bit, slightly bored and wondering just how the heck this was supposed to keep him from eating a kid when he sprouted fur once a month. Jason had once read that during a speech, people paid attention during the first fifteen minutes, drifted off for the second fifteen minutes, and then fantasized about sex during the third fifteen minutes. He decided to skip to the good part.

Mary elbowed him in the gut. "You're thinking about sex, aren't you?"

"Ugh! No! Not at all!" Jason rubbed his sore ribs. "Yeesh."

"... and, that's pretty much how I keep it handled. I don't let it control me, but I don't try and control it. It gives me strength. We give each other strength." Phillip got a few small bits of applause from the gathered werewolves, and Jason decided that this time, it'd be a smart move to clap, since he wanted to progress beyond fantasizing about sex with Mary for the foreseeable future.

"Now, we have a new member with us tonight, and he's going to tell us a little about himself." Phillip stared at Jason, and Jason felt his blood run cold. He shot a dagger-filled look at Mary, who just shrugged and grinned.

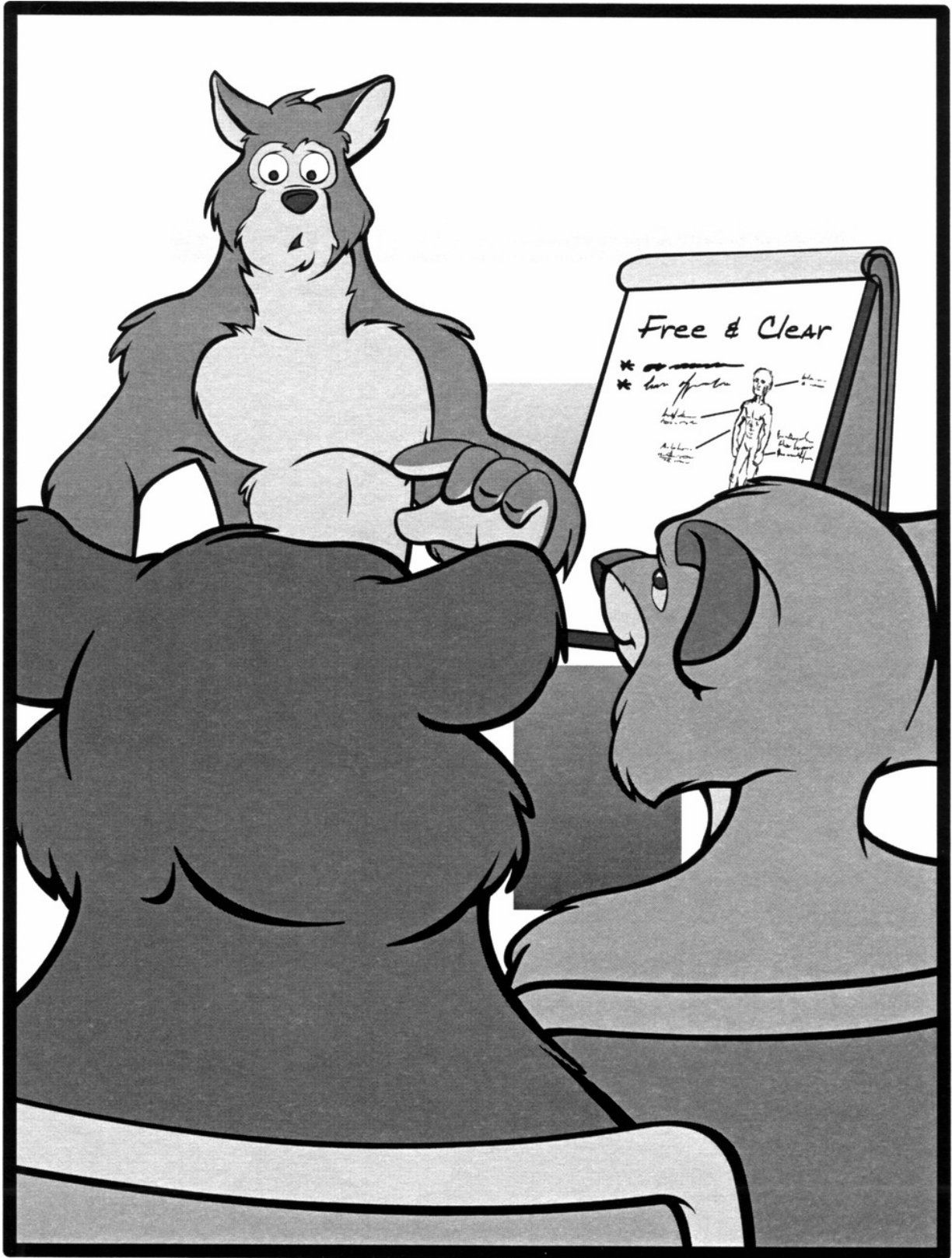
"Jason, won't you please come up here?" Phillip motioned for Jason to stand, and Jason reluctantly did. He shuffled over to the center of the room, gaze down.

He lifted his head, looked around...

... and froze.

He froze, because suddenly he wasn't seeing a room full of normal folks attending a depressing seminar — they were all werewolves. Except they couldn't have shifted so fast, and he'd have heard them all changing. And

their clothes had vanished, too! Jason stole a quick look at Mary, looking as perfectly normal as a vixen lycanthrope could, and naked as a real fox, only with bigger breasts.



She looked at him, raising a furry eyebrow. Jason felt a warm sweat begin to percolate out of his pores. She hadn't shifted. None of them had... but he was seeing their lycanthrope forms, somehow. All calm as if they were watching golf on TV. This was weird...

"Jason? Are you all right?"

Jason cleared his throat, trying not to sneak a peak at Phillip's canine package. "Uh, hi. Hi, my name's Jason, and I... I'm a werewolf."



"Well. That was a first."

"What, I didn't do well?" Jason and Mary were exiting the church, the week's meeting over. Mary looked slightly disheveled, but Jason was a bit chipper. They resumed their walk back home, across slightly darker streets.

"No, you did well, I just didn't expect you to go quite that far. I thought you hated speaking in public."

"Well, all I did was picture everyone naked. Calmed me right down."

"Yeah, but still... you were giddy. Real giddy. I didn't quite expect you to do the lycanthrope version of the Joe Canadian rant."

Jason's face twisted into a grin. "... hi. I'm Jason. I'm a werewolf."

"Jesus, no. Once was enough." She looked around, checking the streets for passerby.

"Hi, I'm Jason, and I'm a werewolf. I don't shed fur, I don't eat children, or talk to animals, or run naked in the forest, or even crap on the sidewalk, and no, I had nothing to do with An American Werewolf in Paris, although I'm sure that if I had, it would have been a good movie..."

"Knock it off." Mary suppressed a giggle.

"I can leap 30 feet in the air during a full moon. I can smell what you ate last week. I believe in completion, not division. Harmony with the animal, not dominance over it... and that the wolf! Is a truly proud and noble animal!"

"Knock it off!" She giggled a bit more, obviously entertained.

"A kitsune is a fox, you CAN be a werebear, and we're called 'wolfpeople!' Not 'wolfmen', 'wolfpeople!' Werewolves are the second most

popular movie monster, the first authority on totemism, and the last word on the full moon! My name is Jason, and I! Am! A werewolf!"

Mary burst out laughing. "All right, Jason, you're a werewolf. Now that everyone in the city knows, you want to head home?"

Jason nodded. "Yep, sounds great. So, have I attended enough sessions to get to try out the 'organic shag carpet' thing you keep tempting me with?"

"Not yet, cowboy. But if you hang in there, well..." She leaned closer, whispering something in his ear.

He blinked. "It does **what?**"



*When they stripped my dignity from me,
you drew down the veil.
When I would have bled in solitude,
you forbade me.
When I forgot myself,
you reminded me.
When I saw myself in the void,
you showed me my face in your eyes.*

You saved me.

I will not forget.

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chronicling the limits of
strength and the power
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Drowning in Moonlight

Andrija Popovic

"I got another ten pages written today."

"Really?" Michael's black-tipped ears rose as his heart sank. *Not again*, he thought, slumping back in his seat. He kept his eyes on the backpack nestled between his legs.

His house mate Eric, a gold-furred Cat'Struct, nodded as he guided his truck onto the HOV lanes. The cab bobbed, then their wheels squealed as the normal highway's maglev lines disappeared and they touched ferrocrete again. "I'm almost at chapter six. The others on the mailing list asked me to slow down. They haven't finished critiquing chapter three yet."

"Glad things are going well," he said. His backpack stared up at him. The shiny black zippers looked like insect eyes. Reaching down, he unzipped the outermost pocket.

"Well, after getting the extranet's security interface debugged I had nothing but time." Eric's words drifted by like the landscape. All Michael could see was a slip of paper, folded four times, poking from the pocket. He plucked it out and unfolded it.

"Cool. So, you and Lorie going out tonight?" he asked. Fridays were husband and wife date nights for Eric and Lorie.

"Yep. You can go and harass Karen until the wee hours." Michael tried not to wince. The jokes were starting to sting. He said nothing, letting the wind whipping past their windows speak for him. Other things occupied him. The note occupied him.

It had arrived via e-mail during lunch. He printed it out and read it halfway through his soup. It killed his appetite.

It killed him.

"Mr. Rees: Thanks for e-mailing your short story to Alternate Structures. Unfortunately, your submission does not suit our needs at the present time..."



"Hey, guys." Lorie sat up and rubbed the last remnant of a nap from her eyes. "How was work?"

"Eh."

Eric, as usual, used the lamp as a hat-stand. He tried sounding worn out and deadpan, as if the drudgery of work had crushed him, but his tail kept batting at the floor in three-quarter time. She smiled. It must have been a good day, but he was aching for a sympathy snug. Not that he needed an excuse, but it made things more interesting.

"Poor thing. C'mere." Lorie patted her fluffy, blue comforter and smiled. Eric tumbled over the sofa-arm, landing on top of her. She laughed. "Clumsy. Owww, watch the elbow." Glancing up, she spotted Michael wiping his cross-trainers on the 'Welcome' mat. He hung his black trench coat on one of the brass wall hooks by the closet.

"And how was your day, Mike?" She tried not to giggle as Eric's hands slipped under the comforter and her shirt.



"It was," said Mike, voice heavy. His shoulders were slumped. When he walked across the living room, his tail hung low, brushing against the beige carpet.

Storm, one of their pet 'saur, peeked his head out from beneath the couch. With a quick "Eep," he dashed across the room and rubbed his long neck against Mike's leg. The Coyote'Struct flashed a smile, then picked Storm up and cradled him in his arms. Storm's claws dug into his shirt. "Heya, Storm. Wanna go upstairs?"

The 'saur cocked his head and said, "Eep!" before nuzzling Mike's shoulder again. He hugged the 'saur as if Storm was the last, good thing in the universe, and walked upstairs. Lorie heard his muffled voice say, "Navi, on" to his computer.

"Is Mike all right?" She absently scratched Eric behind the ears. "He seems, dunno... Depressed."

"Well, duh," snorted Eric. "He's always depressed. Mike never smiles, never laughs and moans about the world in general. God designed him to be an angst pit. He's never happy unless he's miserable."

She winced. "Stop that."

"What?" said Eric, dripping false innocence.

"Using my own words against me. It's annoying." Lorie batted his shoulder, but he just purred in return. "Besides, I don't think he deliberately does it. It's not like he intended to mess up with Karen."

"He screwed up just the same." Eric dug into her. She sighed, looking down at her husband. He rested on her chest, purring like a kitten. Damn, he was cute.

"So," she said. "We doing anything for dinner?"





"Hello, Michael. You have new mail." His default cursor, a small 'super deformed' image of God pointing with a big finger, waved to him. God's curly brown hair and furless skin made the cursor seem even sillier, squished proportions non-withstanding.

"Thanks, Navi. Please open, text only. Apply the usual filters." Michael set Storm down on his bed, petting the 'saur along the dorsal ridge, listening to him coo in contentment. A HoloWindow appeared, scrolling through fifteen new mail messages. He touched the shimmering panel of charged air, gently guiding his cursor along his in-box.

"As you wish, Michael. Please let me know if you need anything." He pulled a keyboard from beneath his desk, tapped a few keys, and watched the reply windows materialize.

So many mail messages, he thought. Most would have thought he had a lot of friends. A lot of friends in other parts of the country, or other parts of the world, yes. Few people close by. He loved Eric and Lorie dearly, but he could not tell them everything.

And they rarely inspired anything but doubt.

His Navi beeped halfway through a letter, disrupting the low hum in his room that fed his concentration, leaving a mangled sentence in its wake. Tapping the backspace key, he glanced at the new window the Navi spawned in the air beside him. Karen was pinging him with an EyeSeeU window. He double-tapped it with his finger. The window expanded like an origami sculpture. A pretty Ferret'Struct glanced back at him.

"Heya," said Karen, twitching her ears. "How are you?" Michael slumped in his chair. It squealed in protest. "That bad, huh."

"Yeah," he murmured, rubbing the muscles surrounding his muzzle. "It's network, either. It's..." He raked his fingers through his head fur.

"S'okay, you don't have to talk now. You coming to the store?" He slouched forward, muzzle open and a response on his tongue when Lorie stomped up the stairs.

"Mike, Eric and I are heading out to dinner. You want us to bring anything back?"

Mike sighed. "Oh, any one of your table scraps is just fine. I'm content surviving on all your meager drippings," he said, arms crossed.

Lorie smiled. "Ok. See ya tonight," she said, bounding down the stairs.

On the screen, Karen opened her mouth, presumably to scold him, then frowned. "You were serious, weren't you?"

"Yup."

"They can't tell the difference anymore, can they?" she said.

Downstairs, the door slammed shut. Storm bolted off his bed, spooked, and mangled the covers as he ran out into the hall. Michael leaned to his left, peering at the window facing the parking lot. White light poured through his Record of Lodoss Wars wall scroll and the throaty roar of Eric's truck shattered his Navi's humming.

"No," he said. "But they don't notice a lot of things anymore." He massaged his forehead, waiting for the noise to pass. "I'll be down in a bit, Karen. Ok?"

"Ok. I'll keep an eye out," said Karen. "Be seeing you. The window closed."



Angels sang to Michael as he shouldered open the comic book store's door. He glanced up at the holograms. "*Konbanwah*, Folken, Van..." After a moment, the holograms faded. "I wonder who they were," he murmured.

"That was Van and Folken von Panel, from Vision of Escaflowne." Karen's head appeared from behind the counter, a cap perched between her ears and wrap-around mirrorshades resting on her muzzle. "You should know that."

"No I meant — " He shook raindrops off his synthleather jacket. "Who were their muses? The guys who created Van and Folken? Who inspired them? Did they ever get discouraged? Lose hope?"

"You could always ask God," she said.

"Nah." He leaned against the front counter, lowering his head. "I think God has better things to do. Besides, right now I feel like curbstomping him."

"Eeef. There's a line for that, you know. So, what happened?" She swiveled back and forth on her chair, the seat squeaking plaintively. Michael pulled the printout from his jacket, unfolded it, and let the whole thing drop onto the counter.

Flattening it with the heel of her paw, Karen read it. Seconds passed, heavy with the barks of a few last-minute shoppers pawing through back issues before the store closed. Finished, she folded the printout again, then waited until the last of the patrons filtered out. The clock chimed Eight.

"*Shikso*. That's rough. Store, closing time!" One by one, the fluorescent lights shut down, front to back, until one amber room light remained, casting a pool of radiance around the register. "This isn't your first reject, though."

"No but..." He glanced over the counter. "Urn, can I grab a seat?"

"Sure." She kicked the gateway open, letting him step behind the glass cases.

Ignoring the folding chair hidden behind the Warhammer miniatures, he collapsed into a heap on the floor, a pool of black and amber on the green rug. The back of the case felt cool against his fur. He looked over at her.

"I feel like I'm back home again, Karen." Michael clutched his skull and let out a thin, puppy-like whine. Ears flat, he raised his muzzle. "I can't do enough. I can't get anything right. Everything I do, he does better. Next to his stuff, my stories look like 'saur puke. I... I can't win."

Karen rubbed his paw. "Hey." Her voice was soft and warm, like a familiar blanket. "It's not all that bad."

"It's worse. Back in the day, he could ask a girl he'd never seen before to dinner. Two dates and she'd be his." He snorted. "It takes me, what, six months to get a single date? And after all that, I lose her to someone else." The skin inside his ears pinked and lowered, heavy with regret. "Sorry. It slipped out."

"S'okay," said Karen. "I had fun those few times. And, honestly, you know it wouldn't have worked out. Not like that."

His tail smacked the floor. "Yeah. I kinda guessed. We make better friends than anything else."

Karen smiled. She scooted over and sat right beside him. "See, most guys wouldn't understand that. To them, friendship's a consolation prize. They'd just keep going until everything was wrecked. You? You knew better."

"That's not what Eric and Lorie say. 'If you'd only been more aggressive, you'd have a girlfriend right now.'"

"If you'd been aggressive, you wouldn't have had anyone to talk to right now," said Karen. "Being a gentleman isn't a bad thing, no matter what they say."

He laughed. "Can you tell them that?"

She smiled and ruffled his head fur. "About you and me, yeah. But talking to Eric is your job."

Michael jerked his head up. "What?"

"You can't just keep bottling this up. He's hurting you, even if he doesn't know it. You've got to tell him how you feel."

"No!" Michael bolted upright. "No, I can't. It's not his fault he's better than I am. My problems are my fault." He slammed his fist into the wall. Warhammer blister packs rattled on their hooks, a wave of swinging packages rippling away from the impact. "I can't blame him because I'm incompetent."

"You're not blaming him and you're not incompetent." Hauling herself off the floor, Karen crossed her arms and stood her ground, blocking the counter gate. "But he's still hurting you. He's making you lose hope, and he deserves to know he's doing it."

Michael paced. His shoe treads made tiny, rubbery ripping noises as he turned. He raised his hands, opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came

out. Growling in frustration, he covered his eyes and collapsed onto the floor.

"Mike?" Karen's arms were around his shoulders. Long, whimpering sobs wracked him. He shook like a puppy.

"How?" he choked. "How am I supposed to tell my best friend he's killing me?"



★ ★ ★

Lorie hissed at her door lock, swiping her key card through the reader over and over. "C'mon. Open up, dammit." She swore one of the

neighborhood kids had tried cracking it. Now it never opened on the first try. The lock finally beeped and went green, the deadbolts clicking back. "Mike, I'm home. Eric went out to get groceries."

Heavy, liquid beats assaulted her ears, drowning out her words. A small child shouted, "Viva! Viva! La revolucion!" Inside the house's shell of soundproof insulation, her SoundSystem's speakers rattled like eggs about to hatch.

She ran across the room, dialing down the volume and returning the bass to normal. "Mike?"

"Hi, Lorie." Mike's voice snuck out of the kitchen, slurred. As she walked in, he sealed the door to the enclosed patio, hand shaking, barely able to work the latch. A bottle of Rakia, ancient plum brandy, sat on the counter. It had been half empty and sitting in the liquor cabinet when she left. Now it was out and only a quarter of the bottle remained. She knew where the rest had gone.

"What are you doing?" She grabbed the bottle and held it in front of him. "You're on medication. This could kill you."

"Oh, only if I drink the whole bottle," he said, rubbing his muzzle. "I just had a little. Just enough." His tail thumped against the linoleum floor, an irregular beat. "So how was your date? Perfect as always? He tell you he loved you and how he can't wait until his novel is finished?" Tears trickled down his eyes just as he started laughing.

A cold tingle ran down her spine and she hugged herself. "Mike, what's wrong?"

He paused and locked his dark, tear-streaked eyes on hers, then exploded into laughter. "But, Lorie, *everything* is wrong! Remember? 'He's always depressed. Mike never smiles, never laughs and moans about the world in general. God designed him to be an angst pit. He's never happy unless he's miserable.'"

A lump formed in her throat. Even drunk, Mike's imitation was uncanny. She wished she could swallow those words. "So something is wrong? Dammit, we can't just tell with you. You look down all the time —"

"AH!" He lunged at her like a fencer delivering a telling blow. "Never confuse low-key with depressed!" He smirked, snatching the bottle away, uncapping it and taking a long pull.

"Mike, dammit, what happened? This about Karen again? I swear, if you'd just gotten off your ass —" The Coyote'Struct nearly spat out his liquor, barking in laughter, and Lorie jumped back a step.

"I knew it! I knew you'd... Hold on, hold on." He stumbled to the phone, knocking it off the hook. Lorie crept closer, muscles tense. He swayed as he punched the keypad. "Hold on. Hold — Hi, Karen. Yeah, 'tis me. Look, Lorie's here can you tell her what you told me? Thanks..." He covered the mouthpiece. "It's for you."

The phone shook in her hand. No, her hand shook. She was scared. Lorie did not know this Mike; this hurt, desperate Mike.

No, that was not entirely true. She caught a glimpse of him this way one New Year's Eve, but he was normal the next day. It was nothing. It was just Mike.

No. It was not just Mike and it was not normal. His transformation jarred her, like a song suddenly changing from soft vocals to a harsh, angry guitar chord. But the change was not sudden. The hints were always there, in the background, where she could conveniently ignore them until the white noise caught her off guard.

She slipped the ear piece into place, then said, "Karen? Can you hold for just a bit." The patio door was unlatched by then and Mike was halfway through. "Seriously, please, what is wrong? What can I do?"

Mike toyed with the door handle, clicking the latch back and forth. "It's not you. It's me and..." He sighed, resting his forehead against the cold, metal frame. "Could you please tell your husband to stop being so perfect?"

It took a while for the words to sink in. When they did, he was outside and the door was sealed again. She touched the ear piece once more.

"Karen... what happened today?"



Michael gazed up at the sky with his hand tucked beneath his head. Cool winds ruffled his fur, breaking the clouds above and letting the moon peek through. He focused, trying to pick out Luna 2 and the Lagrange colonies through the transparent mesh enclosure.

The door slammed open, wrecking his concentration. He nearly fell out of the hammock and had to plant a foot on the deck to keep his balance. "Hi,

Eric. Did we get enough popcorn for this week — "

" — What the Hell is going on?"

"— 'cause I think we're running low." Michael lifted his head. Arms crossed, Eric glared at him. "You look ticked."





"I just spoke to Karen. And Lorie. She's really upset. What in God's name has gotten into you?" He winced as Eric threw himself into a deck chair, scraping the plastic against polished wood. Slowly, Michael pulled himself upright. "So you got a rejection letter," said Eric. "So what. I've gotten them."

"Recently?" Michael's ears perked up.

"Well, no." He stiffened. "Still, it's not the end of the world. Look how far you've gotten in the last three years! You've escaped from your family, you've got a good job, a roof over your head... Ok, you've still got to work on the girlfriend front — "

He groaned. "I thought Karen explained that to you!"

"She did," said Eric, slumping into his chair. "Guess you were right about her."

"Thank you."

"But, still, you've got to be more aggressive when it comes to finding someone."

A chuckle trickled from his lips. It spilled into a deep, rolling laugh, knocking Michael back into the hammock. The stars swung above him. "This coming from the guy Lorie jumped and stripped naked on their second date." He kicked his legs out, leaping to his feet. "Four months of Web conversations! Then, on your *second* real, face to face visit, she jumps your bones!"

"Well..."

"Eric, Lorie literally fell into your lap just because you were you. You didn't have to pursue her, you just let her tackle you!" He paced, fingers massaging his forehead. "It's just that easy for you. And, God, it hurts."

"Mike," breathed Eric. He sounded tired. "I... I don't understand. Karen said I'd hurt you and Lorie said you asked me to stop being so perfect I mean, hell, I'm not perfect! I'm an arrogant ass most of the time."

"But you're an arrogant ass that outshines me at everything I try to do." He aimed his eyes skywards. "See the moon?"

"Yeah." Michael glanced over. Eric's eyes were focused on the heavens, peering through a massive break in the clouds.

"Now, can you see the colonies at Lagrange 5? Can you see the way the sun reflects off O'Neils?" He watched Eric focus, covering the moon with one hand.

"No. The moon — " He froze, his words hanging like motes of frost in a winter breeze.

"Yeah. The moon is so bright, you can't see the sunlight off the colonies. They represent, what, years of tireless, even thankless work? All designed to carve a home from dead space." He sighed. "But you can't see them thanks to the moon. All that work, drowned out. Like it never existed or mattered."

"I'm the moon?" He chuckled. "And you're an O'Neil colony cluster? Kinda fitting. You and your orbitals."

"You're not the moon. Not entirely." The Coyote'Struct sat on the hammock, crossing his legs underneath the sagging canvas. "The moon doesn't know it's drowning out years of hard work and sacrifice just by being itself. The moon can't let the colonies outshine it, even for a little. It doesn't know how frustrating, how heartbreaking it is to live, belittled by the light of another."

"Mike, I didn't mean — "

"God, that's the worst part of it." He looked his roommate dead in the eyes, chocolate brown meeting metallic green. "You don't know you're doing it. You're just being yourself." He sighed. "But, could you try and not shine in my eyes? Please? Because compared to you, everything I've ever done feels worthless." His face felt wet and his nose grew stuffy. He wiped a tear from his whiskers as another rolled into his mouth. They were bitter.

"I mean, I know I have a long way to go," he continued. "And there's a lot of hard work ahead but... Can you let me shine now and again? For once, I'd like to feel like I matter."

Eric said nothing for a while. When he did speak, his words were deliberate and careful. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel this way. But, I don't know what to do. How can I help?"

The hammock squealed. "I... It's hard to explain. But, maybe it's just a matter of turning down your shine just a little bit. Not, um..."

"Flaunting my good fortune?"

"Yeah." Somewhere in the pause, the wind sang. Clouds rolled by overhead, swallowing and releasing the moon. A few leaves, caught by the wind, smacked into the side of the enclosure. Then Eric broke the silence.

"I'll try," said Eric. "You're my best friend in the world. That's the least I can do." Then, the Cat'Struct started laughing. "No flaunting, huh? And here I thought you liked watching me make out with my wife."

Michael laughed. A genuine laugh, with no bitterness or pain. "Just because I like something, doesn't mean it's good for me." He covered his eyes with his arm. "Thanks, Eric. Thanks for listening."

"Sure. Just... promise me you'll tell me these things sooner. Without the Rakia. We shouldn't need booze to be honest with each other."

Michael nodded, tail whipping along the deck.

"Need some time alone?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

Eric rose, tucking the deck chair under the small sun-table. He closed the door behind him. Michael uncovered his eyes and focused skywards. A cloud, thick and black, covered half the sky, obscuring the moon. He squinted, running his gaze a few degrees to the left, around where Lagrange 5 would be.

Something twinkled. It was tiny, but it glimmered like a necklace in the sky. The Coyote'Struct watched the glimmering, enjoying the night winds running through his fur. When the rustling of the trees grew to a furious hiss, he howled, matching their pitch before breaking down and laughing.

"Glimmering winds," he said aloud. "Winds..." He shot up from the hammock, leaving the Rakia behind and ran inside for his laptop.



Dark Lighthouse

M.C.A. Hogarth

"It's beautiful out today," Laelkii said, sliding onto the bench with a mug of hot chocolate.

Taylitha glanced up at her, brown ears swiveling forward. "I suppose," she said. Her own stein of copper-bright ale had sweat off most of its chill, and she cradled her dark face with one hand. Strands of scarlet hair escaped her braid to hang in front of blue eyes shaded lilac by the dense purple clouds of gas and dust outside the window.

"Gee, Tayl, any more enthusiastic and you might set off fireworks, there," Laelkii said. She leaned forward and flipped back one of the errant strands of hair from Taylitha's face. "You can't honestly say you're unmoved by the glories of space! Right?"

Taylitha shifted and chuckled. "No, I can't. But I'm bored sick of this nebula. I thought there was some law against using ships the size of the 'Dancer to re-supply bases one-tenth her size. The real stuff is out there!" She waved a hand. "And after we're done with this last puny station, we'll be on our way."

"Hmph," Laelkii said. The older woman sipped from her mug, white ears splaying and brows lifting. "You'll be missing these vestiges of civilization once we get 'out there', I bet."

Taylitha laughed. "Never! Never, Snowhide. I like a good shopping spree as much as you do and a good tavern better, but I joined to head into the great unknown."

"So we could build new shopping malls and taverns there," Laelkii said, eyes sparkling. " 'Discover and Expand'... that should have been Fleet's motto."

"The Alliance's, at least," Taylitha said. She gave in and grinned. "Really, Snowhide."

"At least you're smiling now," Laelkii said, returning the grin. "When I walked in you looked about ready to deflate. Is it really the grunt-work that's got you down?"

Taylitha eyed her. "Who's asking, Snowhide or the Chief Medical Officer of the UAV *Stardancer*?"

"A little of both, probably."

Taylitha traced the rim of her stein with a brown finger, her ears falling. "I'm just frustrated, I guess. Dropping off coffee and chicken to forty stations inside a nebula is just boring. It's all the administrative work of a normal assignment without any of the adventure or the glamour. And it makes the ship feel so small."

"A-ha," Laelkii said. "Good old cabin sickness. You've been exercising?"

Taylitha nodded. "There's no one to spar with." She held a hand out when Laelkii opened her mouth. "No one who can give me a real challenge. I can jog and swim and hit every other kind of solitary exercise, but there's no one to run me around the practice mat. Not with a sword."

"I imagine not," Laelkii murmured. "The sight of your multiple trophies probably scared them all off." She shook her head. "Well, if it's any comfort, this next station is the last and then we'll be doing something more exciting."

Taylitha nodded. "I keep telling myself that." She sighed and pulled from her mug, then stood. "But I should get back to duty. If we're going to re-supply Cat's-Eye Station 40 as fast as possible, I have to do some paperwork."

Laelkii chuckled. "Don't work too hard, Commander."

"Tell it to my boss, Snowhide," Taylitha said with a kink of a smile.



Taylitha stepped off the Pad, allowing her relief to surface as a smile. Behind her six ensigns pushed the first of the grav-counterbalanced crates into the station's cargo bay. She wished again that the stations had been either supplied with enough raw material and strong enough power plants to create their own supplies with genies, or that a string of Pad relay stations reached out this far.

People of various races dressed in station black and gray arrived to help the *Stardancer* ensigns begin the transfer of the remaining hundred crates earmarked for this final station. Watching them only long enough to ensure they were working smoothly, Taylitha turned to find the station

administrator. As First Commander, it was her duty to oversee the proceedings and greet the admin or admina. She usually enjoyed meeting people, but after thirty-nine such greetings, she was ready to shake a hand and go back to her cabin.

The nebula station commanders had red shoulder stripes on their uniforms, different enough from what marked a Fleet officer's that Taylitha had to remind herself to look for it. Before she could complete her inspection of the cargo bay, a man stepped up to her. A human man — taller than her, built as if exercise meant more to him than a way to maintain the bare minimum of health requirements. His blond hair had been trimmed so flat she could see the curve of his skull through it, and he had a mustache and short beard. His arresting eyes were a complicated gray-green, but his hand stole all her attention, for the calluses etched on his fingers and palms matched her own.

"First Commander? Welcome aboard the CENS-40. I'm Avram Hancock, Station Commander."

"Taylitha Basil," Taylitha answered once she found her tongue. The press of his hand against hers sent a prickle up her wrist and arm. "Pleased to meet you, Commander."

"Even after 39 other base commanders?" Hancock chuckled. "I admit I'm impressed. Lady."

"It's been an interesting cruise," Taylitha said with both candor and rue. "I have manifest papers and a few data wands for you."

"Ah yes. Paperwork. Let's repair to my office and get that over with."

Taylitha chuckled. "I like the way you think. Commander."

Hancock indicated the door out of the cargo bay. His eyes sparkled. "Thank you. I hear your ship is on its way into the greater dark after this, Lady."

"That's correct," Taylitha said. "We're finally going to get a few good pictures of what's out spinward of your nebula."

"I admit I'm pleased. It never made me particularly comfortable that no one knows what's out there. It's one thing to face the unknown with a real halo-shield generator and several banks full of entropy packets... Heck, even a launcher and a few hundred large rocks. Another thing entirely when your forty-person base has the offensive capability of a small mouse."

Taylitha laughed. "Somehow I can't think of you as a mouse. Commander. You have at least one claw."

He glanced at her sharply, then flexed his hand. "I thought I felt calluses. Oh, Lady, I wish you hadn't said anything. It's hard enough to resist asking you about it as it is."

"Hard enough to resist asking me about what? What style of swordplay I enjoy? What my favorite weapon is?" She grinned. "Trust me, the temptation is mutual. I haven't been chased across a mat in longer than I like to remember."

"Me neither. So what is your favorite weapon and style?" He grinned, stopping in front of a door and pressing his palm to it. "Might as well ask, right? Life is short enough."

"Is it?" Taylitha asked, amused. The door slid open on a spartan office of the same dimensions as all the other offices she'd visited in the past weeks. Hancock kept very little in his. A bookshelf held some paper-bound books with titles too small for Taylitha to read without squinting; the miniature globe on the edge of the desk was surely very old, though she didn't know enough human history to be able to pinpoint what era had produced it.

The row of certificates across the opposite wall interested her more. She recognized the tournament seals on several of them without having to read their texts. "You won Le Ceans?"

"Yes. It was a close thing, though," Hancock said. He grinned. "I worked hard for that one."

"So did I," Taylitha murmured.

"What year?"

"455."

The human shook his head. "I was there in '50. What a tournament!" He sighed, then smiled at her. "We should get the paperwork done before we while the entire morning away talking... And before I'm tempted to ask you to stay the afternoon to spar."

Taylitha, extending the data wands and her data tablet to him, stopped. "You're interested?" she asked, concealing the spike of excitement that had sent her heart racing.

Hancock took the data tablet from her and glanced at the header information. "Do I look like I'm made of ice, Commander Basil? The champion of the most prestigious sword-play tournament in the Alliance

Core walks into my office and hands me a manifest, and you expect me not to want to see if my skills haven't rusted since I won five years previous?" He looked up from the tablet, and she couldn't quite name what she saw in his gaze. "Trust me. Lady. The last thing on my mind is checking the list against the crates."

"It could be arranged," Taylitha said softly, "If you have someplace appropriate."

"There is an appropriate place," Hancock said, never blinking.

Taylitha whistled the three-note arpeggio that activated the telegem nestled on the inside of one felinesque ear.

"*Stardancer*, Killian here."

"Ensign, tell Alastar to send someone to help me oversee the cargo off-load."

"Very well, sir."

"And tell her to have that person bring my sword."

"Sir?"

"My sword, ensign."

"Yes, sir."

Taylitha whistled the connection closed and then lifted her chin. "So, Commander. Let's see how fast we can cut through the red tape, eh?"

His grin spread, took on a predatory edge. "With you. Lady."

Ten minutes later, Taylitha retrieved her sword from Second Commander Alastar Virgil, who studied her with a mildly puzzled expression. Leaving Alastar the tedious work of overseeing the checking of the manifest against the crates' contents was cruel, but she'd work a shift for the Second Commander later. The familiar leather of the scabbard soothed her sweating palms as she followed a man in station gray to the gym.

Her eagerness bordered on something wilder, and disturbed her. Had it really been so long? Each station required about three shifts to complete the check-out. Combined with transit time, they'd been in the nebula some month and a half already, plowing through endless veils of purple fog toward the dim glows strung around the nebula's inner shoals like lighthouses on the craggy shores of a forgotten sea.

Taylitha squelched the analogy before it could suggest that she was drowning. She stepped into the gym.

Hancock was already inside, stripped to a pair of loose jersey pants. The opening door caught him in the middle of a warm-up form from the Karentzeret bastard-sword school. She recognized the swing of the right arm and the looseness of the hips even without the balancing arc that should have been completed by the tail; the human compensated by leaning back a little more on his left foot.

She was staring, almost greedily, her sword clutched in her arms. His grace in the form left little to conjecture. At last, a real contest of arms!

"Lady," he said, turning to her after running through the last of the form. "I was just warming up."

"I saw," she said. The far larger gym servicing the *'Dancer* had windows that the tinier station couldn't afford, but his sweat-stained skin still glistened in the warm light from the overhead fixtures. Placing her sword gently on a bench, Taylitha pulled off her boots. Her pants and uniform tunic followed, leaving her clad in the stretch-suit that served most officers for both underwear and exercise clothing.

When she looked up, she realized he'd turned away, making her suddenly aware that she'd been undressing. Clearing her throat, she tied her hair back. "What length and size would you prefer, Commander?"

"You brought only one sword. Are you allowing me to hope..."

"That she's a holoblade?" Taylitha pulled the hilt free from the scabbard, leaving the blade-length strip of steel inside. "What did you win Le Ceau with?"

"Variable Holoblade."

Taylitha stared at him. "No wonder you worked hard," she said, and beneath her amazement roiled a hard hunger. "There isn't a person on the ship who would — "

"Try to take you on with a variable holoblade, Lady?" The human's grin flashed teeth. "I will, if you're willing."

"Willing!" Taylitha flicked on her blade, listened to the pitched hum, felt her arm flex at the 'weight' generated by the magnetic field to simulate an epee. The only thing holographic about a holoblade was the colored image it projected to warn its user of its current length and width. "You will have to drag me away from this mat to stop me."

He picked up his own sword from a bench and flicked it on. "Your wish, Lady."

"Your guard, sir!" Taylitha leaped forward.

He jumped to meet her as if completing her motion, and he was. The holoswords met, scraping, and she slid the breadth control beneath her thumb before his thicker blade overpowered her at the wrist. His strength communicated clearly through their swords, as clearly as it would have had he used it directly on her.

The settings on a holoblade could be set to any thickness and length supported by its power supply. The blades were designed to mimic a certain blade throughout an entire exchange, and had been used that way until someone had decided to try resetting the breadth in the middle of a bout at the Craillii Trials, giving birth to the variable holoblade style.

Variable holoblade had no official school because no one could codify any forms that captured its essence. By the time a person could fight the style, they had learned too much to require forms at all. Bouts were judged not by how well the participants kept to the forms, but how often the settings changed.

Hancock didn't swing without changing them.

They parried and riposted, danced and ducked and clashed, the gym walls painted in flickers of gold, scarlet, orange and yellow. Taylitha worked harder than she ever had, harder than she had for her own trophy.

She felt alive. Alive matching herself to him, shedding sweat and swaying and thrusting in response to him. They were linked, action and reaction, unable to move without eliciting a counter-move.

Hancock leaped into her next thrust, their blades clinging. He pressed forward, locking the hilts together. They were so close the swords let off their irritated proximity buzz. Too close to fragile skin. Too close... Taylitha's wrists trembled as she struggled to break the lock of their hilts and their eyes, sweat dripping down her face.

His sword slid to a filament-thin purple and she tumbled forward as the pressure she'd exerted on her much broader blade cut off her balance. His hand shot out, wrapped around her wrist, prevented her from falling.

Her pulse dashed against his sweat- and silk-soft thumb. Taylitha gulped. "I..."

"We've been in here half an hour. Lady," Hancock said, and the rasp of his bass matched the flutter in hers. "And you're surprised? We're both tiring."

"I — half an hour!"

"Half an hour," he agreed, the gentleness of his voice at odds with the intensity of his gray-green gaze. "The most enjoyable half hour I've had in months."

"Me too," Taylitha said, trying to regain her composure.

"Join me for dinner before the '*Dancer* goes?"

"Commander – "

"Avram."

"Avram, I," Taylitha gulped in a breath, found herself speaking without planning the words: "I'd be delighted."

"Excellent. Mark 18, say?"

"I'll be here."

He hadn't let go of her hand yet. "Thank you, Lady."

"No... thank you," she said. "And it's Taylitha."

"Taylitha, then. I'll see you in a few hours."

She left, her uniform over her shoulder and her sword sheathed in its false scabbard. As she approached the cargo bay, she found herself gripped with unease. Had she really agreed to dinner with a man she barely knew? On the basis of a sword fight? Granted, one of the finest she'd ever engaged in — those arms! — but it still seemed precipitous.

Taylitha repaired to the *Stardancer* and read Alastar's report on the transfer while preparing to shower. It took only a few minutes to summarize the proceedings for the captain and send the mail off, freeing her to enjoy a long shower without a guilty conscience.

The door chime startled her out of the bathroom fifteen minutes later. Tucking the towel around her body, Taylitha said, "Who is it?"

"Laelkii Takara."

"Oh. Let her in, then."

Laelkii stepped inside, took in her dishabille in one glance and grinned. "I see I caught you just in time."

"In time for what?"

"To help you primp and condition for your hot date tonight!"

"My what?" Taylitha squeaked. "I'm not – "

"Not having dinner with the station admin tonight? Oh come on, Tayl... don't tell me the grapevine's that severely flawed." Laelkii grinned and brushed past Taylitha, padding into the bathroom and crouching in front of

the cabinet. She opened it and poked at its innards. "Come on, back into the tub. You need more soaking. Preferably with something scented in your water. Don't you have any bubble bath?"

"Bubble bath?" Taylitha managed. She followed the older woman, tail and ears sagging. "Snowhide, really, this isn't what it sounds like."

"Do you deny you spent the afternoon swording with him? And enjoying it! You came back sweatier than a plow-horse, I heard."

Taylitha covered her face with her hands and moaned.

Chuckling, Laelkii gently pushed her back toward the bath. The First Commander's suites weren't as palatial as the captain's, but the designers had still managed to sneak in a tub across from the sink and the toilet. "Tap on," the C-Med said. "Hot, please."

Taylitha sat on the edge of the tub, the damp towel crinkling around her as she bent over her knees. "I've already showered," she said without conviction.

"You look like you need a nice soak," Laelkii answered. She frowned. "You know, I came to get the gossip. Now I'm beginning to think I'm here to keep you from falling apart. What's wrong, arii?"

The old-fashioned word for 'friend', combined with Laelkii's gentle tone, sent a shudder through Taylitha. "It's not a romantic thing, Laelkii. We have a common interest, which we decided to share for half an hour. I'm going to dinner with him, probably just to talk about that common interest. He's on my level, if not better. I don't get this chance often."

"'Probably'?" Laelkii said with an arched brow.

Taylitha looked away. "For Bast's sake, Laelkii, he's human."

Laelkii sat next to her. "What does that have to do with anything?" she asked. "I was expecting something like 'I've only known him half a day' or even 'I'm not attracted to him', not 'he's not my race'."

"It has everything to do with it," Taylitha said. The tub had stopped filling, and the steam rising from the water was inviting. She slipped a hand into it, winced at the sting. "I... I just couldn't. With a human. Bast, Snowhide, they made us."

"Ah-ah-ah. They made our ancestors centuries ago. Sun and stars, Tayl, that was before space travel was even common! It's not like humans are some sort of god."

When Taylitha didn't respond, Laelkii's frown grew more pronounced. "It can't be that simple, can it? You don't honestly think of humans as superior to us just because centuries ago a few of their ilk knitted together their DNA strands with those of a cat's, or a fox's, or a killer whale's for Sun's sake!"

Taylitha began to shiver. It was hard to differentiate the heat of the steam from the heat inspired by memories of his intense, complicated eyes. "No."

Laelkii sighed, pushed her into the tub. "In with you. Your teeth are starting to chatter." The older woman rummaged in the cabinet, came back with a mild, rose-scented shampoo. She squirted some of it into her hairless palms, rubbed them together, then applied herself to Taylitha's red hair. "Now, talk to me. You're obviously attracted to this man."

"Y-y-yes," Taylitha said. She grimaced, torn between the pleasure of the scalp massage and dismay over how her body wouldn't stop shaking. "What's wrong with m-m-me?"

"You're upset," Laelkii's voice had gentled. "It's natural... don't worry about it. Just keep talking to me. Tell me about the man."

"He's handsome. For a h-human. There's a lot-t-t going on behind his eyes."

Laelkii nodded, continuing her ministrations. Taylitha sank down, resting one cheek against the older woman's leg. "He was funny, and articulate. And g-good with the sword. I haven't met anyone better, Snowhide, and I've known a lot-t-t of people." She swallowed. "While we were fighting, it was like I was more alive. We moved like p-p-p parts," she fought with the word, "parts of a whole."

"Mmm," Laelkii said, then chuckled softly. "Unusual for a man to make love to a woman first and then ask her to dinner."

"Laelkii!"

"Do you deny that it was intimate? It sounds it, and you're acting as if it were."

"I... yes. Y-yes!" Taylitha shuddered. "But it's not right-t-t, Snowhide. We barely know one another, and he's human!"

"I bet it's just the latter that's bothering you, right... Try to imagine him as some other race. Asanii, maybe, or even Karaka'An."

Taylitha closed her eyes, but matching a Pelted's features to Avram's face proved difficult. Humanity was too much a part of what defined him. "It's hard," she said.

"Then imagine the exact same situation, but with a Pelted commander."

"That's not so bad," Taylitha admitted.

"So it's just that he's human."

"Oh, Bast," Taylitha whispered. "I'm a bigot!"

A bubble floated past them both as Laelkii shook her head. "Let's not go that far. I've seen you talking and working with races of all kinds, gengineered and alien, without any problems whatsoever — including humans. You're no xenophobe, Taylitha, or you wouldn't have passed the Fleet psych evaluations. Sunspit, arii! No one with a thirst for the unknown as deep as yours has a tendency toward fear of the unknown in people. So let's stop that thought right there, agreed?"

"Then what-t's wrong with me?" Taylitha asked, scraping a lock of shampoo-matted hair from her face. "He's a handsome man, and interesting, funny. Why do I find it so frightening?"

"It' being continued intimacy, since you've already shared some?" Laelkii shook her head. "I'm not sure. A dinner sometimes is just a dinner, though. Particularly since we're leaving soon after."

"Anything can happen," Taylitha murmured, finally noticing Laelkii's fingers on her head. She shivered a last time.

"Ah-ah-anything you consent to can happen. Nothing more. This man sounds like a gentleman, so just go and enjoy the evening as you would with any human friend."

"Any human friend," Taylitha repeated.

"Yes," Laelkii said firmly, then pressed on her head. "Duck and rinse!"

When Taylitha came up, scarlet hair streaming around her face, Laelkii shook a finger. "And now, doctor's orders. Enjoy this bath until it becomes tepid, then try to relax until it's time to go. A few hours' rest is not going to hurt you or that stack of paperwork I'm sure is waiting for you. Understood?"

"But I have so much to d— "

"Doctor's orders. Commander!"

Taylitha sighed, then chuckled weakly. "Yes, sir."

"Good." Laelkii grinned and flicked some foam from her face. "I'll see you later tonight for your follow-up, then."

"My what?"

"Good afternoon. Commander."

Taylitha half-rose from the bath, but Laelkii was already gone. Grumbling, she sank back into the water, then sighed. The water stank of roses, and thick clouds of cloying rosehip steam decorated the bathroom. She dragged herself out of the water, scrubbed herself off again, and padded out to her bedroom. Maybe a nap would help her relax.



A few hours later, Taylitha checked the collar of her black and midnight-blue uniform one last time. She'd debated wearing something more casual, but her stomach turned at the idea of going to dinner with the man while wearing a dress. Better not to give a false impression. She was visiting him, one professional to another, to enjoy dinner discussing their mutual enthusiasm, nothing more. She straightened the gold tassels hanging from her rank badge, then walked out of her quarters.

On station, a fox-pointed Seersan man met her at the Pad and led her up a few decks, leaving her in front of a door. Taylitha stared at it, standing in the empty corridors with only the whisk of the air vent a few paces away to remind her of where she was: on CENS-40. To visit the station commander. A very nice man, for a human. One professional to another. She pressed the door chime.

"Come in."

Taylitha walked in and stopped. The variable light of two candles provided the only illumination in the tiny quarters, and her eyes needed a few moments to adjust and take in the pleated white tablecloth, the porcelain plates, and the reflections off the wine glasses. The yeasty scent of bread mingled with the tangier smell of tomato sauce in her nose and she swallowed hard.

Dressed in a loose blouse and dark pants, Hancock grinned from the door directly behind the table. "Have a seat, Taylitha. I'm almost done cooking."

"I — this is too much!" She wanted to flee — who had run into fire-fights and flown into unmapped asteroid belts.

"You gave me such an unalloyed pleasure this afternoon, Lady. The least I can do is give you a fine meal!"

"It smells good," Taylitha admitted.

He grinned. "It'll only be a few more minutes. Make yourself at home."

The man disappeared into the kitchen. Knowing she would fidget if she sat, Taylitha drifted around the room, studying it in the flickering light. Two doors were set into the wall opposite the door to the corridor, one leading to the kitchen and the other... she looked away, catching only a glimpse of a pillowcase in the dark. The small table was nestled against the right wall; a sofa against the left.

A framed poster above the sofa drew Taylitha's eyes, and a shiver ran down her spine. She recognized the image — few people in the Alliance wouldn't — but she also knew enough to estimate its cost. The Opus posters had been reproduced so often that most surveys listed it as the most requested set of prints in the Alliance Core. For all its popularity, it was simple: on a black background, a small gray figure of a man, arms raised as if conducting, with an intricate DNA helix against the right margin and a ghostly set of eyes just visible behind it. Which set depended on the poster — Opus #1 had a vulpine's oval pupil in an equally animalistic socket, for Joy, the prototype who would later become the stock for the Seersa race. Opus #2 had a domestic cat's slit pupil in a human's eye socket, for the Karaka'An — like Taylitha.

Hancock didn't have just any Opus poster, though, but one highlighted in tasteful gold foil. The signature of Project Homefront's Lead Scientist Joseph Shandlin was reproduced in the corner, next to a lock of hair.

A limited edition — it could have cost between two thousand fin and ten depending on whose hair it was. Two thousand fin comprised a substantial chunk of a station administrator's pay, particularly with a billet this inconsequential.

"Like the poster?"

"It's — expensive," Taylitha said, blurting out the first thing on her mind. Her ears flicked backward in mortification, but Hancock only chuckled.

"It was worth it."

"Whose hair is it?"

"It's a reproduction of Holly's." Hancock placed a basket of steaming bread and a tray of butter on the table. "I liked Holly's story."

"She led the Pelted off Earth in a rebellion," Taylitha said, throat closing around the words. "She's responsible for our repudiation of Earth."

"Amazing, isn't it?" Hancock said, seeming to miss her rigid immobility. "What kind of courage that must have taken! She never lifted a sword, but she was a warrior at heart." He vanished into the kitchen and returned with a bowl of plump tortellini, ladling generous portions into their dishes. A boat of chunky red sauce arrived last, and Hancock popped the cork on a bottle of pale wine. "Dinner is served."

"It smells delicious," Taylitha said hoarsely.

"It should be. Pasta's a hard thing to mess up." He grinned and poured, then sat. "Of course, it's harder to eat from across the room."

Startled into motion, Taylitha took her seat and unfolded her napkin guiltily. It did smell luscious. She spooned some of the sauce onto her tortellini, then speared one with her fork and tried it. Her ears perked. "What is this stuffed with? It's wonderful!"

"Some wildfood, cheese and mushrooms."

"Wildfood? Mushrooms? Are you sure it's not ambrosia?"

Hancock laughed. "Certain of it! But it's some of my private stash, so don't let word leak or the entire station'll ransack my quarters."

"Done!" Taylitha said, and reached for the wine.

They talked, the wine flowed, the tortellini sped from their plates and was replaced with second helpings. Hancock's views on the beauty of sword-fighting extended, as hers did, into a kind of life philosophy. They liked the same books, and for the same reasons... Enjoyed the same 3Deos and movies, though he'd heard of several obscure ones she hadn't. He'd never been to Selnor, and she tried to paint a picture of the Alliance's capital world; he'd met the Ambassador of the Kanera and tried to convey a sense of that dignitary's personality.

Dessert was a cheesecake dribbled in caramel and chocolate, and black coffee to wash it down. Taylitha hardly noticed that he brewed his pots strong enough to satisfy even her tastes; she was too busy debating the similarities between the Harat-Shariin schools and the merits of them. She didn't even realize she'd followed him to the couch, coffee mug in hand. "It might be easier to learn for the students, but that makes it easier to learn for the opposition, too. You could learn all of the Harat-Shariin schools and the library of shared moves would warn an enemy against you in any of them."

Hancock chuckled. "That's assuming that a sword-fighter would use the proscribed, rigid forms of a school when in a real fight and not a display

bout, Taylitha. I doubt most people are that thoughtless. Besides, there are Harat-Shariin schools that divert from the main body of the Karentkeri Academy's work. Consider Jezherel's school for light weapons."

"Jezherel's!" Taylitha rolled her eyes. "You might as well toss the swords aside and tango. It's more like having sex than sword-fighting."

He laughed. "Agreed! Agreed."

What began as a companionable silence grew tense until Taylitha asked in a low voice, "Do you know the Jezherel school?"

"Do you?" he replied.

Taylitha's ears reddened and she looked away.

The couch creaked as Hancock stood. She put her coffee on the end table and glanced up when he appeared out of the bedroom, two slender metal dirks in hand. She caught the one he tossed her by reflex and stood, blood heating.

He inclined his head to her in the Harat-Shariin manner of starting a bout... and then danced. Taylitha parried the first tap by rote and found herself drawn in by his sheer skill.

Most people learned the motions of the Jezherel school, but varying degrees of dismay or disapproval over its lascivious air prevented them from ever fully incorporating it into their repertoire.

Hancock had no such problems. A Harat-Shar would have envied the sinuous movement of his body. In such a small space, trading blows with short weapons, Taylitha had no choice but to appreciate it from very close. Her mouth dried, but she didn't pull away. As with variable holoblade, Jezherel's skillful practitioners were few and far between.

Their blades met above their heads and Hancock tilted his to trap their quillions together. They pressed together, and his free hand slid around her back, and Taylitha's mouth opened before she fully realized his intention — and hers! — and his lips met her halfway.

She forgot the dirks, though she still held hers upright. Forgot the smoothness of his exposed skin with his beard rubbing against her. Forgot everything but the electricity of his chest against hers, his hip pressed to hers, his hand at the base of her tail.

Forgot until they parted, and she saw his face.

Taylitha jumped back, panting, one hand outstretched. Her blade fell to the ground with a soft thunk.

Hancock tossed his dirk aside. "Taylitha?"

"Avram-Commander! This... no!"

"I didn't mean to push," he said quietly.

Taylitha bared her teeth and squeezed her eyes closed, horrified at the discomfort that broke the weave of the evening's fine food and conversation. "I didn't mean to tease."

"Did I do something wrong?" He took her hand by the fingertips, didn't move any closer. "You were willing."

And she had been... until she'd seen his all-too-human face, and the unease of the afternoon had become a revulsion she didn't know how to handle. "I'm sorry, Avram. I just don't..." She bit her lip and forced herself to say it. "I don't feel comfortable with humans. In that way."

He hesitated, and the corner of his mouth fluttered, deciding finally on a tiny, mirthless smile. "I see." He brought her fingers to his mouth and kissed them, as chaste a gesture as it would have been from any other member of the Alliance Core. When he spoke again, his voice held distance and something else — a tone that felt like a door closing. "I've had a wonderful bout. First Commander, and a pleasant dinner. Thank you for it."

She cleared her throat, unable to do more than say, "You're welcome," before escaping to the corridor outside. She leaned on the bulkhead for a while, catching her breath and fighting the tremors that threatened to steal her feet from her. Then, wearing a calm as fragile as a porcelain mask, Taylitha returned to her quarters on the *Stardancer*, locked the door, forbade any incoming messages or visitors, and threw herself on the bed, fully clothed.





Taylitha watched the fog of the nebula recede through the vast windows on the observation deck, her fingers threaded together over her ribs. She'd been sitting that way for an hour, and remained that way even after hearing the scrape of another chair dragged to her side and the creak of it accepting an occupant. The scent of mint revealed her visitor's identity.

"I didn't make it," she said, when Laelkii made no move to speak first. Taylitha's voice was tired, but she'd had the night to consider the dinner disaster. "I tried very hard, but I didn't say 'no' when I should have."

Laelkii did not immediately reply. "It takes some strength to admit it was your mistake... But that might be guilt talking, arii."

"Maybe," Taylitha said. "But I don't think so. I had ample opportunity to make my feelings known in a way that would have been understood. Instead, I waited until after it had gone too far, and my overreaction spoiled the entire affair."

One white hand lit on her arm. "Everyone makes mistakes, Taylitha."

"I know that."

Laelkii stood. "So does everyone else. What few people do know. Commander, is that people have to be allowed to make mistakes or else they never learn."

Taylitha's tone hardened. "And what exactly have I learned, Snowhide?"

"I don't know." Laelkii smiled wryly, sobriety masking her already dark eyes. "You'll have to work on that one yourself. See you later. Commander."

Taylitha glanced after Laelkii as the older woman wound her way around the tables and chairs on the observation deck, then returned her attention to the nebula. She thought she could see a spark of light in the fog, but drawing away she realized it was only the highlight of her own eye, reflected in the window.



The Significance of Slam

Corey Kellgren

"Rascal. We've got, ah, a problem."

Rascal opened an eye and gazed down through the window screen at the tabby who'd spoken to her. "Mmm?"

"Ah, rebel. Porch, Parker family. Teaching her kittens, their, ah, history. There's a blue torn standing guard, too."

Rascal blinked, yawning mightily, stretching and preening in the September sunlight, feeling the pleasant warmth on her white coat. History. In that strange place between sleep and complete wakeful-ness, she remembered her own rash youth, her own flirtations with such forbidden fruit. As she came fully awake, she banished the thoughts; they would do her no good. "OK. Gather me up five enforcers and I'll meet you under the sugar maple in ten minutes."

"I knew, ah, they're waiting there, ah, at the maple for you."

"I'm on my way."

Rascal leapt down from the back of the couch and padded out of the living room, taking a detour so she could rub against a leg and receive a quick petting in return. Purring, she bounded through the kitchen and slipped out the back door.

The neighborhood seemed quieter than usual, as if holding its breath in anticipation... of what? Rascal ran her territory firmly, and couldn't remember the last time they faced down a wanna-be teacher. What drove a cat to such straits?

Her assistant proved most efficient. Waiting in the cool shadow of the maple lay five large toms; a blotchy harlequin, two tabbies, a huge solid black with a long, flowing coat and a smaller, scruffier short-haired black. As she approached the younger tabby rose to a crouch, while the others lay still, tails thrashing, ready and willing to help, but content to watch her drowsily until she gave the word.

Such perfect cats, thought Rascal.

"We've got trouble. Under the Parker's porch. Mother's teaching her litter some family history. There's one torn roaming outside, keeping watch. You know the drill. Let's move."

They moved. Lazily at first, more cautiously as they neared the Parker's house. Rascal sent the harlequin out on a recon to locate the defending blue. He returned in a few minutes, and Rascal turned to the two biggest toms, the black and the young tabby. "Take him out. Don't hurt him, just make sure he can't alert his mate. We'll move in five minutes."

The two cats melted into the urban landscape of shrubs and concrete and picket fences. Rascal sat quietly, the remaining toms already asleep or grooming themselves languidly, waiting patiently for the word. Fine cats, thought Rascal, firm in the their belief of how a cat should act. These toms served her because of these beliefs, not out of any compulsion. This bunch were not only large physically, but scholars as well, steeped in study of the meaning of feline existence and the resulting norms of behavior that guided housecats to their present nirvana-like existence in a world dominated by humanity. They weren't dogs, ready to go back to the wild at the slightest provocation, or birds caged, or fish living out their lives in dirty glass houses. They were cats, existing on their own terms, served by humans in a world where food, shelter, and affection were provided without question or cost. Tampering with this success, in the eyes of these quiet toms, was blasphemy of the worst kind, a threat to many decades of hard-won gains.

After all, what was the point? History by definition remained in the past, and should lay there, undisturbed. Rascal glanced up at the sun. "It's time."

They saw no sign of either the blue or the enforcers, as if those Rascal sent after the errant torn had erased all trace of the wrong-headed creature. They advanced. The hole in the base of the porch proved to be small, and the harlequin squeezed through only with difficulty. Rascal came next, ducking her head and bounding inside.

The belly of the porch was masked in dirty twilight, the rich smell of the fertile earth mixed with the stale odor of last year's decaying leaves. Rascal settled onto her haunches, gazing in admiration at the kittens. Their deep blue coats and strange yellow eyes stood out like burnished stars in the dullness of their hideaway. "Angel, sweetheart," said Rascal with a heartfelt sigh, "you've always seemed to be such a fine cat."



Angel cast a wary look at the toms. The young mother reached down to lick at one of the kittens as it started to mewl, feeling the fear coming off its mother. "I'm only doing what I believe is right," she said softly, as if to the ground beneath her feet.

"Right?"

Angel didn't look up, intent on trying to soothe her offspring. "They have a right to know who and what they are. I want them to know the significance of that."

Rascal tilted her head, surprised. Anyone caught peddling such disgraceful information usually submitted meekly to their punishment, knowing they'd gambled and lost. "Right? My dear friend, haven't you heard the humans

speak? Of Israel and Palestine? Of the Congo? Of the blood in the trenches of Europe and the islands of Japan? Do these terrible human impulses not give you pause in teaching this corrupt form of tribalism?"

Angel raised her head, eyes narrowed. "You make it sound unclean, to know where you come from. Do you know where you come from. Rascal?"

"Enough." Rascal couldn't suppress the lashing of her tail, and her soft demeanor began to slip. "You know the punishment."

"Do you know where your ancestors came from?"

Rascal's command caught in her throat. For a long, lingering second she saw herself in this young mother, recalled the long-buried rebellion of her youth before it gave way to the rock-solid convictions of adulthood. But she hadn't been forced to take away a mother's kittens in a long time, so long ago that the memory didn't come easily. Perhaps that gave her pause. Perhaps now that her own days were passing, her thoughts were naturally turning back on her life, rather than forward, as was proper for a cat.

"Take them!" growled Rascal.

The toms advanced. The mother's claws came out, flexing into the soil. Angel tried to step out in front of her kittens, but they clung to her legs, tripping her up. Glancing down, then back at the circling toms, the light went slowly out of her eyes.

Rascal saw the shudder sweep through her body as her muscles unclenched. Angel pushed one of the kittens forward. "Go with them," she said softly.

They went. Rascal could see Angel's heart go with them.

Rascal padded over to stand near her. "You did the right thing. Trey Parker will find the kittens on his doorstep tomorrow. You'll be taken to the vet so this doesn't happen again. And the kittens will find good homes. They're beautiful."

Angel looked away. "You think so?"

"I do. That blue torn of yours is a looker, too. You'll be OK, Angel. In a few weeks you'll be a proper cat, doing what cats do. Laying in the sun, eating, chasing dust motes, curling up in your owners' laps. It's a terrific life, my dear." More sharply than ever before, Rascal heard the emptiness of those words as Angel's litter tumbled across the lawn.

"But not a life I chose. Your ancestors supposedly came from Siam, you know." Which didn't bear answering, really. Rascal slipped out from under

the porch and into the early evening sun, knowing that Angel just needed a few days to orient herself. Pausing in the shade of a lilac bush down the block from the scene of the crime. Rascal paused to clean off a paw that always seemed to attract burrs.

And paused. Many times, Rascal had admired herself in a low-hanging mirror; the way her white coat fairly shone in the light, her deep blue eyes, the rich darkness of her points. Suddenly, it seemed like more than looks. Her coat, eyes, her sharp mind and sharper voice, all the work of genetics, of traits passed down through countless generations to shape her, a unique cat. A Siamese cat. Her owners used the word to describe her often enough.

Rascal shook off such brooding thoughts. She'd led a good life, a cat's life. A meal and warm window sill awaited her. The rest didn't really matter. Siam didn't really matter. Especially since she had no idea what it was.

Trying to push away the memory of the confrontation, Rascal turned for home.



The Brave Little Cockroach

Mark Mellon

In the cool, crisp night, when forest predators seek their prey, Gregor struggled on, clad in his heavy leather armor. The keen, round, marbles of his multi-lensed eyes revolved independently as he scanned the path ahead. The trail threaded through the thick forest that covered the level plain, the heavy stands of trees dominated by gigantic fibrous banyans, vines hung thickly from their branches. The path was faint. No comrade had followed it since before the rains; and much had been washed away. Misgivings assailed him. One wrong turn, an incorrect fork of the trail, and he would be lost, potential prey for a tiger or king cobra. Stinking of decay but determined, he left a trail of phosphorescent slime for his comrades to follow.

Earlier that evening he had been attacked by wolves as he trudged across an open patch of ground by a heavily fissured stone hill. He had scrambled frantically for a crevice in the stone, but had been unable to get completely inside before the beast bit savagely into his left rear leg. It snapped in two with a brittle sound, allowing Gregor to pull the remainder of his shattered leg to safety. The wolves scrabbled with their claws at the unyielding stone until, denied a more satisfying meal, they left to seek easier prey.

Gregor examined the mangled limb, white blood gently seeping onto the rock. His spiracles ached from frenzied breathing, and he knew the worst part was yet to come. A strong work ethic had been instilled in Gregor from the moment he left the ootheca. An educated cockroach — a soldier — bred to a high purpose, he knew that he must follow the path of Lord Krsna, Master of the Blue, to the end, no matter how bitter. Like countless other cockroaches who had gone before, he would report for duty at the Project.

Gregor began the hellish process of wriggling out of the crevice, the hairs of his mangled leg telegraphing an urgent message of searing agony if he so much as brushed it against the rock. Once clear, he heaved himself unsteadily onto his five good legs, and lurched onward. It was almost impossible to make good progress on only the five legs. Periodically he would forgetfully put weight on the damaged leg only to collapse in severe

pain. Gregor got up each time and pressed on, but getting weaker with every passing hour. It was the end if another predator found him; flight was out of the question.

Fatigue and pain conspired to dull his normally keen senses. Time and distance passed in a dull haze until an indistinct murmur penetrated his stupor. At first Gregor thought a river crossing lay ahead, and gave himself completely over to despair. He had no strength to cross. The specter of failure taunted him, yet he forced himself to push on until he could see that which had defeated him.

A broad river indeed lay before him, but parallel to his path. Gregor's heart stood still. Just beyond the river's bend, flanked by four slender, ivory towers, the great, truncated dome of the Project shone in the moonlight. Her immaculate white beauty was nearly obscured by the billions of cockroaches who swarmed about the Project, carefully, painstakingly tearing the building to pieces. He heard the rasp of files against mortar, chisels' chink, and the groans of stones pried apart from their long union with one another.

Luck was still with him! He had reached his goal, but his strength was failing and he had a great distance to travel still. The sight of his long anticipated goal gave him enough energy to force himself to struggle on, past ruined, moated battlements of heroic dimension, almost around the bend, in a last, desperate effort.

A work party of carpenters sent out to cut forms found him. At the sight of their half dead comrade, each cockroach dropped his chainsaw to race to Gregor's aid. Antennae quivered in sympathy over their fallen brother, and they gently lifted him up with their quasihands and carried him back to the Project. Barely conscious, Gregor realized he was among his own kind at last. They would provide what he needed to heal: darkness, filth, and the warmth of their companionship.



Gregor awoke to find himself swathed in a huge white cotton swab, pleasant after his ordeal, soft and warm. Homelike smells comforted him: offal and scum. A dim green light broke the black void, and he smelled a distinctive, utterly feminine cockroach stink. By the weak green glowlight,

Gregor saw a nurse approach, well-formed and sprightly, trim in her leather armor. He drooled spit when he realized she had brought food, a small pot of reeking, black goo carried daintily before her. She set the pot down, took a long handled spoon that hung by a lanyard from her neck, and methodically fed him.

"How long have I been here?" he squeaked between mouthfuls.

"Enough time to shed," she said.

He looked at his deathly white quasihands, just beginning to take the usual dark brown hue. The doctor cockroaches had induced a skin shed ahead of schedule. He waved his legs and felt new strength. "When may I start work?"

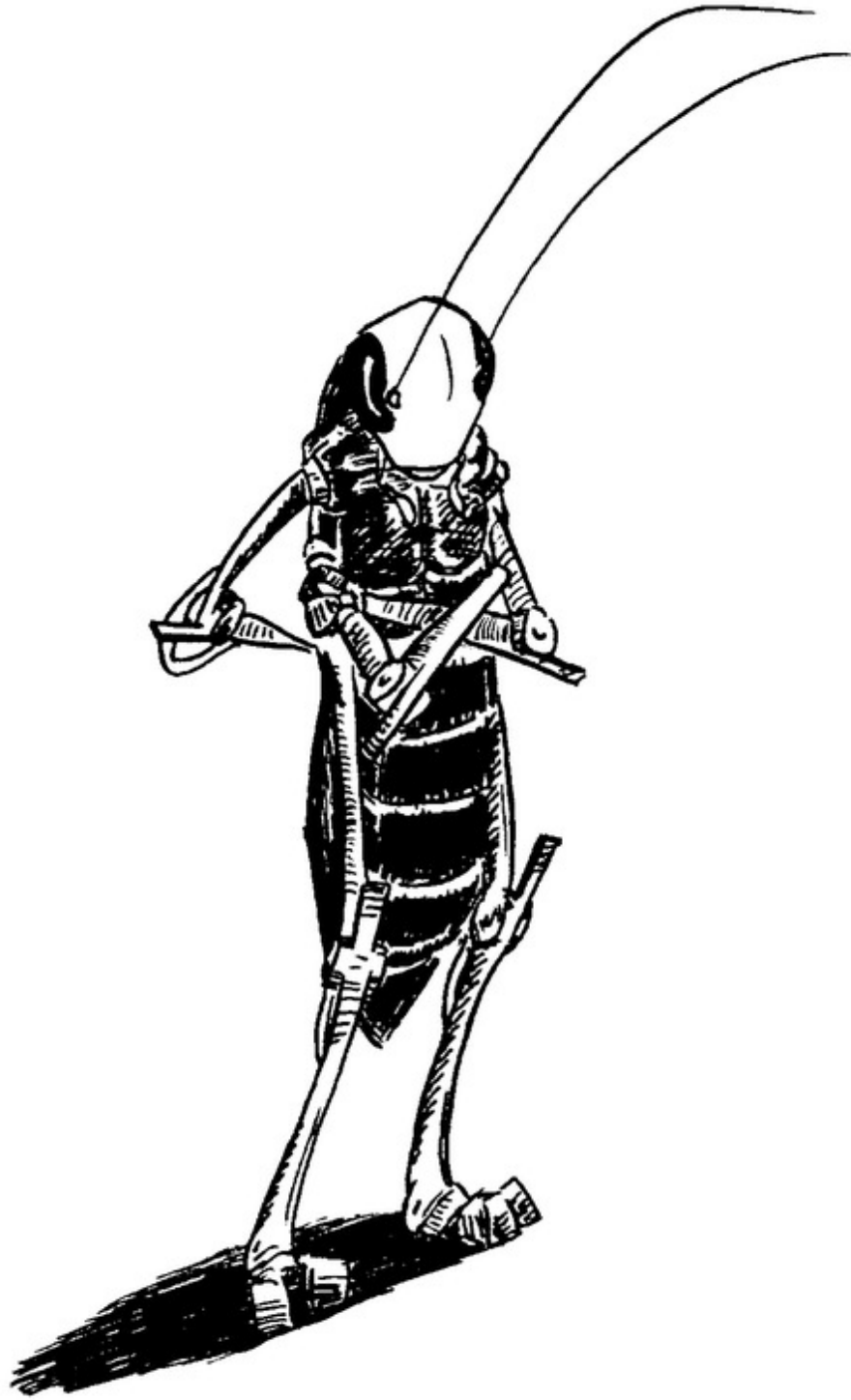
"When your prosthesis has fully fused."

"What is a prosthesis?"

"A metal leg to help you walk. You are lucky you reached the Project. Thousands of comrades are injured every day by falling stones. Our doctors are experts in devising replacement legs."

"Can I work for the Blue once the thing fuses?"

"Yes," soothed the cockroach nurse. She spooned the last bit into his mouth and leaned closer. Their antennae almost touched. "The whole Project speaks of how you fought off wolves." Her antennae quivered with emotion. "You are indeed a brave cockroach soldier."



She stood up and left, but Gregor's mouth and antennae caught a whiff of odor, a faint but unmistakable tinge of pheromones, a token that even a naïf like Gregor understood was no taunt or tease, but rather a hint of ecstasy to come.



The night finally came when he was pronounced fit for duty. Gregor got around well on his artificial leg and soon grew accustomed to the lack of sensation and the odd tapping sound the prosthesis made. He took his place in the Project. Soldiers like himself, with no special skills, were set to simple tasks. They carried tools, gathered and dispensed food and water to exhausted laborers, and performed other menial duties. Once the taskmasters noted his strength and hardihood, Gregor was assigned to haul a huge wheeled cart with a team of comrades up and down the great ramps that flanked the Project.

Other roaches did the sophisticated, demanding work: mason roaches separated one block of marble from another; artisan roaches restored each delicate piece of stonework damaged in removal; and jeweler roaches protected the semi-precious stones inlaid into the marble. Gregor strained at his rope with his cockroach sepoys. They dragged stones down, laid them out for transport, and thanked the Blue they didn't have to scour the riverbank for scum to feed the comrades.

Despite the arduous toil, the roaches worked tirelessly, their enthusiasm never flagged. Every roach knew that if the work quota was met, then on every tenth day Paradise would be granted: the Blue would touch them.

When the long-awaited dawn came, the cockroaches broke from their customary routine of hiding from the hated light in countless hollow log barracks in their serried ranks. Instead, they stood in their billions in the open. Their faith was rewarded. The Blue overwhelmed the red blush of dawn. It pervaded their senses: mouths and antennae smelled it, coarse hairs felt it all around, and cerci sensed the Blue in the gentle wind. Their very fat bodies quivered in adoration. They stood immobile, unafraid, certain of the Blue's protection.

Lord Krsna's words had been with them since birth, and now the familiar benediction reverberated inside chitinous exoskeletons again.

"As long as thou keepest faith with me, I will be true to thee. Labor long and obey the commands of thine taskmasters. Keep thyself humble and abased and know that the only glory is in completion of the tasks that I, Lord Krsna, set for thee. When the time comes to make the perilous Return,

fear not the jungle and its long toothed beasts of prey, for the Blue shall smooth a path for thee. Set off confidently into the night, unwearied by thy

Burden. Do not fail in the Quest, to do so is to fail the Blue and lose Paradise. When the end of the Quest draws nigh, rejoice, for I, the Blue, will draw thee into Me. For I am the Blue where thou begin and end, wherein all things are ultimately subsumed."

Ecstasy swept over Gregor and his brethren. Their blood ran forwards and backwards. The Blue dispelled but the roaches remained in their places, desperate to prolong the experience, until the cruel sun drove them inside. Gregor huddled next to his fellows. Dedication redoubled after a bout with the Blue, he wondered what extra effort, what extra sacrifice could be made to further his usefulness to the Project.

As days passed, the cool weather faded and the days grew more oppressive, taking longer for the night air to dispel the heat. Work consequently grew harder. Gregor and his brethren had dragged their cart up a ramp to a landing, when they were given a short break. Their sides throbbed as they gasped for air. The taskmaster sent Gregor for water and slime to relieve the crew's thirst. Ready to drop, the steadfast roach nonetheless set off for the river, a bucket hung from his neck.

He was close by the water when a soft, almost undetectable wisp of musk penetrated the marble dust that choked his mouth. The heady odor of female roach pheromones instantly quelled all thought of fatigue. The smell was familiar, previously savored by his mouth and antennae — it was the nurse from his recuperation, lying in wait for him somewhere near. He turned aside from his appointed task in search of her, the bucket left behind, for even a brave soldier like Gregor was ultimately only exoskeleton and fat body.

She had chosen a small, secluded dell for their tryst and waited for him there, leather armor shed, thorax and abdomen fully exposed by the faint radiance of a green glowlight. Gregor fumbled with the clasps to his armor. They stood before each other, naked and unashamed. Tenderly, tentatively, they approached and rubbed antennae.

Gregor turned away from her and spread his wings. Sickly sweet yellow foam trickled from his back. Slowly, gently, she ate his seducin. The feel of her quasihands on his abdomen, the sensation of her mouth against his back, and the anticipation of their union, all added up to the most erotic experience in Gregor's short life. As the seducin took effect, the nurse stood

paralyzed so that Gregor could turn and stand end to end with her, in a coupling as intense as any other. When they finished, they parted never to meet again. Gregor knew that his seed would bear fruit in her ootheca and give rise to new cockroaches, exact copies of Gregor who would in turn give their lives to Lord Krsna. The knowledge that he was now a complete roach made the inevitable harsh scolding of the taskmaster for his tardiness bearable.



The heat continued to intensify. All moisture evaporated, and the air filled with choking brown dust. Cockroaches died from the sheer strain of motion. Only the hardiest survived. The great dome of the Project was now nearly completely disassembled, white stones laid out in orderly rows like ghostly troops on parade. The time for the Quest Back would come soon. Despite its known rigors and dangers, Gregor yearned for it ardently. Did it not mean union with the Blue? Gregor was born and bred for this task! He pitied the skilled roaches, condemned by artifice to remain behind, doomed never to find fulfillment, never to meld with the Blue.

They labored now to deconstruct the four slender towers that flanked the disassembled dome. As his team slowly dragged a heavy load down a ramp, his thoughts turned to the perils waiting to be bested during the journey – of the jackals, dholes, and panthers lying in wait, hungry and vicious. Preoccupied, Gregor didn't pay proper attention to his work. He gave no heed to team mates' warning screeches when the quasihand-brake gave way and the clumsy cart plummeted toward him. By the time he recognized the danger, there was no room on the narrow ramp to scuttle out of harm's way, no time even to make peace with the Blue...

The cart shot past an antenna's breadth away, the wheel rolling harmlessly over his prosthetic leg. The cart pitched over the edge of the ramp to tumble end over end to the distant ground below, scattering stones as it cartwheeled. It landed with a resounding smash.

"You fool," snapped the taskmaster, "have you dungbeetle brains? If it wasn't for that peg the docs gave you, you'd be broken and useless. Wake up, Blue damn you!"

Gregor mouthed excuses. Another cart was brought up and the team resumed labor, but a new idea gnawed at Gregor. When he finished his shift, he didn't sleep as he was supposed to, but instead went to the hospital and asked to see the head doctor. Fortunately for Gregor, the hospital was enjoying a rare slack period, and his request was granted.

The doctor was a kindly elder roach, exoskeleton faded from age, antennae bowed from responsibility. "Yes, my dear boy," he said, as he looked up from the scroll of roach anatomy upon his desk, "always glad to see a former patient. What can I do for you? Does your prosthesis need adjustment?"

"No, doctor," answered Gregor respectfully, "in fact, there was an accident at the Project. The wheel of a heavy cart rolled over it without doing any damage."

"Splendid, glad to hear it," said the doctor with professional enthusiasm. "But you haven't taken time from precious sleep interval merely to give a testimonial."

"No," said Gregor, hesitating for a moment before plunging ahead in his usual soldierly manner. "The accident made me think. I want to have all my legs replaced with prostheses."

"Prostheses," the doctor gently corrected. There was an awkward silence. Gregor could see that the doctor was puzzled. "Why do you want your remaining real legs replaced, Gregor?" he finally asked.

"The time for Quest Back will come soon." "Yes, that is true."

"I almost failed on the Project Quest when a wolf snapped my leg in two."

"You needn't remind me, Gregor. I amputated the damaged limb."

"If all of my legs are replaced, my chances for a succeeding will be better. In my armor, I will be almost completely protected from predators."

"Yes, but at what cost," demanded the doctor. "Think of what you will lose without your real legs, Gregor," he continued, his voice suffused with paternal feeling. "You will be deprived of most of your sense of touch. You will lose your quasihands. Many will consider you less than half a roach."

"It's a price that I'm willing to pay."

"We have all been raised in an ethic of sacrifice, Gregor, but this is more than any roach has ever offered to give before. You ask too much of yourself!"

"It would be worth it," said Gregor fervently "to serve the Blue!"

The doctor bowed his head reverently at this mention of the Eternal Principle. Gregor knew he had won the argument and that the doctor would make no more objections.

"That is the paramount consideration," the doctor admitted. "Such an operation would be unprecedented and require a certain amount of planning. You will have to be excused from duty to let the prostheses fuse."

"I will ask the taskmaster immediately!"

"You will not need to. I will make all necessary arrangements."

"Thank you, doctor!"

"There is no need to thank me, Gregor. We are all only doing our duty. Oh, and Gregor," he said as the cockroach turned to leave.

"Yes, doctor?"

"Blue bless you and keep you."

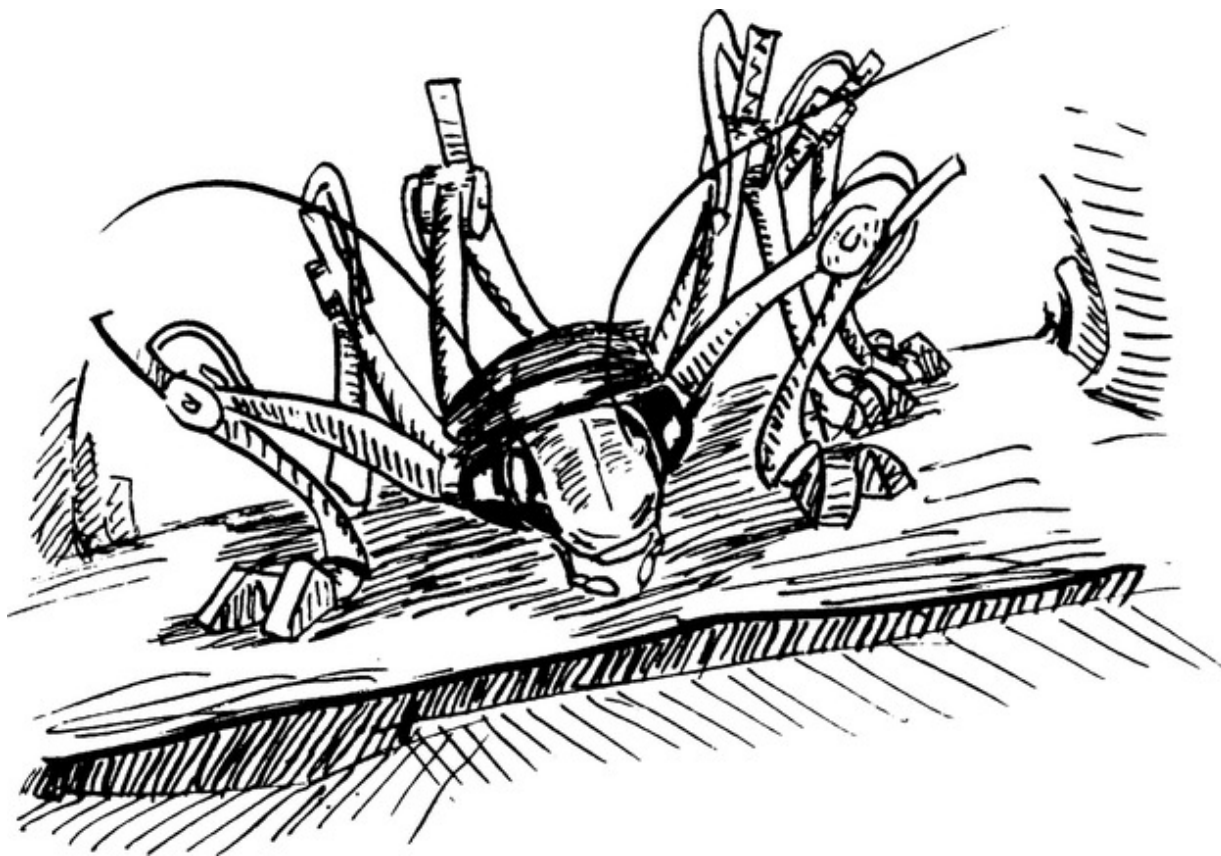
And with this benediction, Gregor departed, flush with the idealism and certainty of youth, leaving the aged doctor alone to ponder the wisdom of it all.



As it happened, Gregor didn't even have time to say goodbye to his mates on the hauling team. In short order, the doctor roach had him prepared for surgery. Gregor lay naked on his back on the operating table covered with a sheet. A large crowd of roach interns in surgical masks and gowns crowded the operating theater, curious to see such a novel surgery performed. The doctor had taken Gregor at his word — there was no room to retreat from his hard decision. The black marbles of his eyes, fixed on the ceiling, never moved as the doctor anaesthetized Gregor with a minute dose of Black Flag.

The doctor picked up a pair of bolt cutters and went about his grim business. He snapped off a leg with a sickening crunch, making sure to leave a goodly stump for the prosthesis to fuse to, and applied a thick, foul smelling unguent to the raw end, sealing up the flow of fat body. He then affixed the shiny, metallic prosthesis. Five times he performed the process that transformed Gregor into a creature more robotic than insectile, a roach armored in steel greaves. There was much applause when the last prosthesis was attached, but the doctor, in no mood to take a bow, dismissed everyone to ensure his patient's welfare.

A difficult convalescence followed for Gregor. As with the loss of his first limb, he was wrapped in white gauze and induced to shed his exoskeleton. Five times worse than when he had lost the first leg, he ached for the sense of touch to the phantom severed limbs, where now only lifeless steel flexed. His youth and cockroach vigor once again asserted themselves and Gregor recovered with amazing speed. In a ten-day he had mastered the prostheses, and could stride confidently with a clanking gait about the hospital ward. The doctor carefully inspected each prosthesis, testing its fit and flex, the fusion of tensile steel to chitinous exoskeleton, and finally pronounced him sound.



"I'm ready for the Quest Back?" Gregor eagerly inquired.

The doctor held his quasihands before him to calm the impetuous youth. "In good time. Tomorrow there will be a final test, a last appearance if you will, then perhaps. Until then, eat well of slime and offal and sleep long in your log. The future holds much for you. Pink Roaches shall call to wait upon you before dusk. Until then. Blue day, Gregor."

Gregor bowed deferentially to the doctor with a great clang, wheeled about, and returned to the ward. At the appointed hour, giggling female

roaches in pink striped dresses roused him to accouter him in fine, ribbed black leather armor, the attire of a gentleroach. He could not help but admire the dashing figure he cut in a mirror by the light of a green glowlight: a young buck encased in shiny black with six menacing steel legs. The doctor arrived, resplendent also in black frock coat, top hat, and pince-nez.

"Well, Gregor," he said, warmth and affection undisguised, "the moment has come. You are ready to go on your Quest."

"Doctor, how can I thank you?" piped Gregor.

"You would oblige me if you would allow myself and some colleagues one final visit with you, more to congratulate you on your remarkable recovery than for medical purposes."

"Gladly," said Gregor, grateful that even the doctor couldn't tell when a cockroach blushed.

"Then please follow," said the doctor.

He led Gregor out of the ward down a corridor, where he began to hear what sounded like the roar of water. They entered the operating theater. The roar was the beat of hundreds of flaccid quasipalms, applauding wildly. Stunned, Gregor looked about the theater. He saw Project notables: the Chief Engineer; the BlueMaster; and the Ultimate Taskmaster himself, elegant in their ceremonial uniforms. Delegations from each of the great cockroach artisan guilds stood and made their approval plain with raucous cheers. There, up front, was his hauling team and his taskmaster, positively beaming with pride! It was a surprise tribute. The doctor crawled to the podium, and the roaches fell respectfully silent.

"Fellow Blattariae," he intoned in his sonorous actor's voice, "devotion and self sacrifice are inculcated from the moment we leave the ootheca, yet a paradigm of cockroach steadfastness like that of this young roach has never before been encountered."

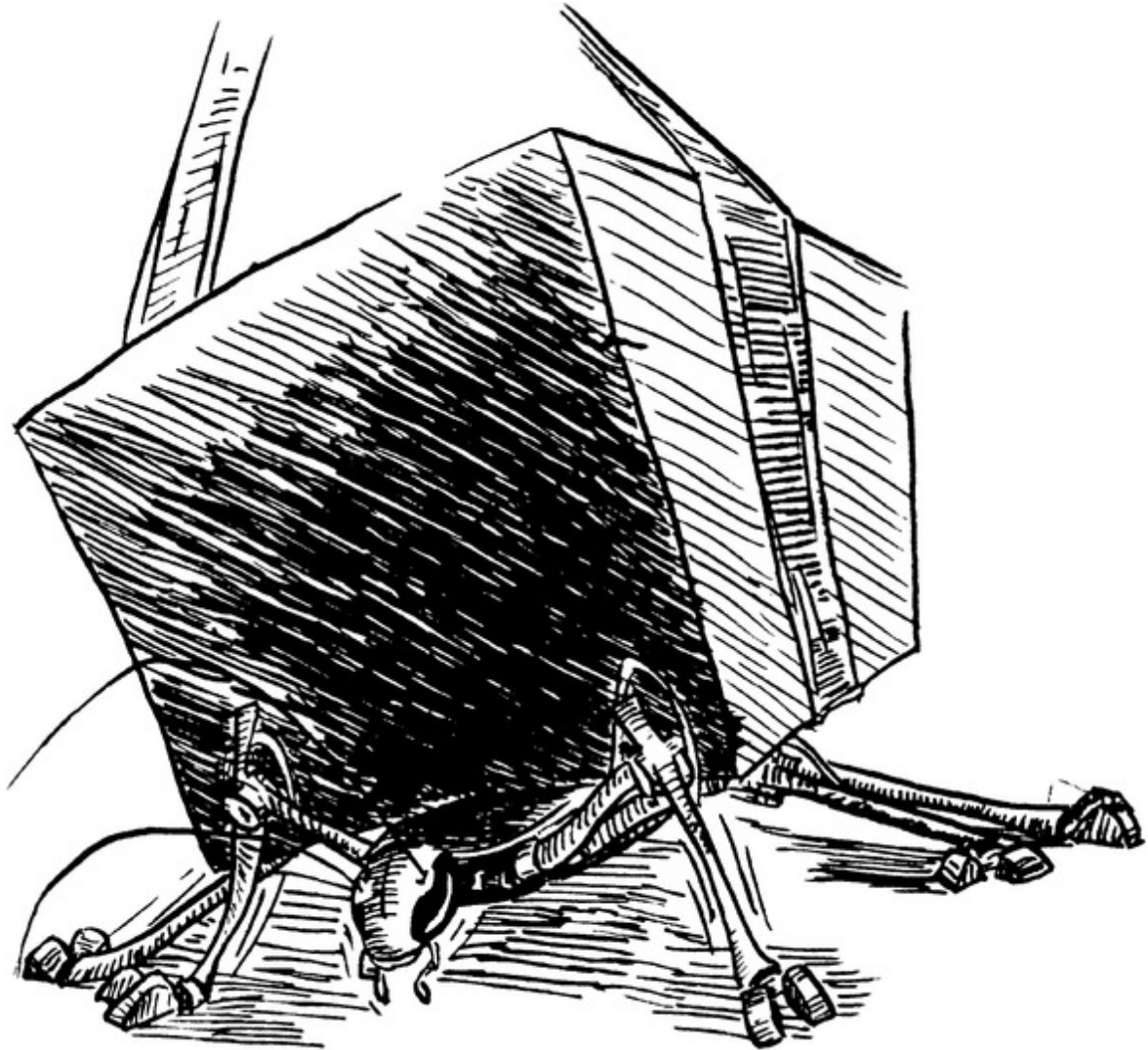
The doctor paused, overcome with emotion.

"I will never forget the moment when he came into my office and calmly told me of the sacrifice he was ready to make to the Blue. This young roach, in the prime of his strength, asked to be permanently mutilated for the Cause. I have never been so moved in my life."

The doctor paused, removed his pince-nez, ostentatiously cleaned them, and resumed. "That is why we honor him today, as he sets out on his Quest Back. Although he will be but one among millions who toil each day under

the grueling burdens, Gregor is special, much more than an ordinary roach. No one has ever given so much before. He exemplifies the courage and the sacrifice that we have made for the stones that we have dislodged at the cost of so much white blood! He has set an example that will be told and retold for generations – and followed by countless other hero roaches."

A white cloth fell from the ceiling with a great flourish to reveal a 10-K marble block, beautifully preserved, semi-precious stones agleam beneath layers of raw caterpillar silk, hung by a slender cord. The audience gasped and oohed as the stone slowly descended. Gregor was overcome with emotion. Almost inadvertently, a simple soldier who only tried to do his duty, he'd become a hero. He carried with him more than a marble block; he carried the hopes and aspirations of the Cause. He rose to the occasion and, with impressive manner and great dignity, walked to the center of the operating theater where the doctor had operated only a short time before and stood, legs splayed, ready to accept his Burden. The marble block was aligned and lowered with painstaking slowness upon Gregor's willing back. Despite the leather armor, Gregor felt the great weight press down inexorably but gave no sign of strain. Nimble porter roaches lashed the stone to his thorax and abdomen.



"Farewell, Gregor," said the doctor tearfully, "Farewell, brave roach!"

Gregor set off with an awkward lurch that nearly knocked him asprawl, but quickly recovered. The applause reached new heights as he crept forward, and once, Gregor thought he saw the nurse roach in the crowd, her mouth frenziedly twitching approval. He plodded boldly, confidently, out of the theater and away from the Project, headed steadily south. South to the land where Gregor had been born and raised so long ago that it hardly seemed real. He had no memory of it, but knew in the core of his being that it was where The Blue lay.

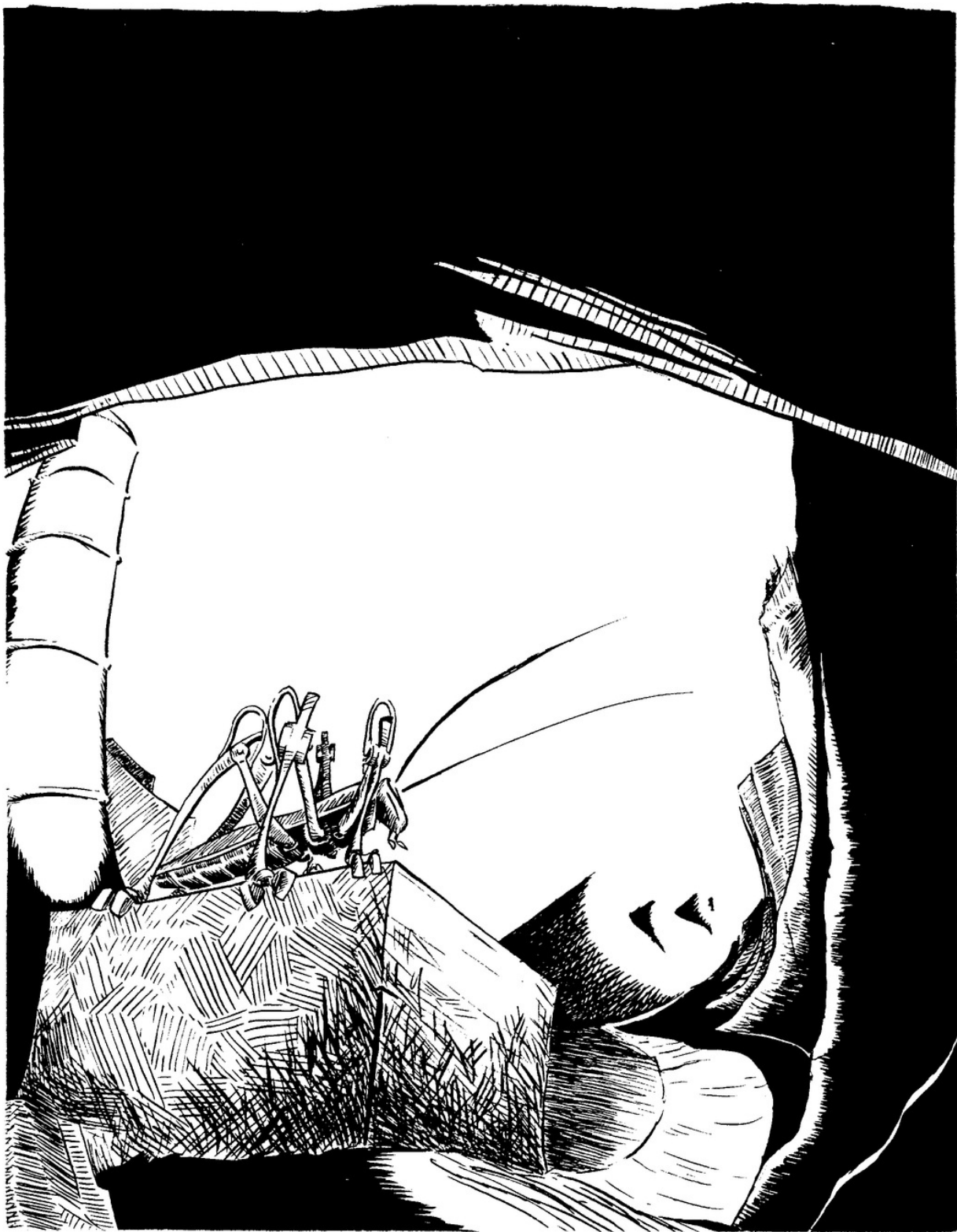
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The Quest Back proved easier than the original trek to the Project, though the stone was a continuous crushing weight that sapped both energy and strength. It drastically reduced the amount of ground that he could cover in a night, and the hot, arid weather grew in intensity until his mouth was choked with dust and he thought his exoskeleton would crack.

Unlike the first trip, however, there was no threat of danger. Gregor walked boldly down open trails without the slightest concern. He terrified predators by his fearsome raven aspect, by the loud, metallic crash of his legs as he steadfastly stomped onwards, and by the ghostly white cube that floated above him.

He husbanded his ration tubes, picked his daytime shelters carefully, and prayed devoutly to Lord Krsna. The jungle eventually thinned and gave way to rice paddies and stands of mango trees. Wild game and predators disappeared to be replaced by strange two legged animals, brown like himself, with white rags wrapped about their heads and torsos. They set bowls of rice and rose water at the side of the road, held images of Lord Krsna before them, and abased themselves to Gregor as he stolidly crawled past, indifferent to their tribute.

He continued southwards and seaward, drawn by an internal compass to a narrow promontory of land, and down to the very tip of a peninsula jutting into the Arabian Sea. He passed skyscrapers and ancient stone buildings which lay in ruins, grown over with weeds and dusty from neglect. As Gregor rattled through the half empty city, he was joined by other cockroaches at every turn, until they formed a vast queue numbering in the tens of thousands. A great, square building loomed before the roach army, painted pale blue. The voice of Lord Krsna sounded from a black, gaping doorway in its center.



"Come to me, my children! I am the Blue. This is the end of Quest Back. Come into me."

Joyously, Gregor and his brethren, each staggering under the weight of a heavy stone dragged over 2000 kilometers, crawled onto a conveyor belt that led inexorably to the black maw of the Blue. Insectile alleluias pierced the night air as they passed into the mystery.

Almost immediately, torrents of burning fluid cascaded down, searing eyes and legs. Furnace heat and violent gusts of wind tore at them. Oblivious to the pain, the roaches soldiered on, even as their legs dissolved beneath them. Gregor too slogged forward, insensible to the fact that his fellows had been reduced to husks, mere crisped remnants of once vibrant, living roaches—he thought only of the Blue. The scorched black marbles of his eyes could see but dimly now, but his fine black leather armor and metal legs protected him where others had failed. He saw a brightness ahead. With one last joyous heave, Gregor passed through the aperture into:

A sudden surcease of pain. A clean place — the air cool, the light gentle. The conveyor belt carried Gregor onward into an immaculate white room, its enormous space packed with carefully stacked and sorted marble blocks. At the end of the belt a robotic arm plucked the stones off the burnt corpses of other unfortunate roaches to add them to the stacks.

Gregor could make out none of the details, with his burnt eyes. All he knew was that the pain and torture had ended in a big white light. A short distance away, two vague, giant figures loomed before him, one with a bare torso and countenance of Sky Blue. Then, he heard the voice that caressed him and his fellows every ten-day. The voice of the Cerulean One. He was in Paradise! Lord Krsna, his Maker, stood before him! Gregor lurched off the conveyor belt, mindless of the heavy stone on his back, indifferent as he crashed to the floor, and scuttled forward to greet his God...

An elephant headed man waved his trunk imperiously. "Sir Lord Krsna, you may be dreaming of your dancing girls, but this business you should attend to! Oh, my most goodness gracious, yes... This is a most important part of our Project!"

The Maharaja Sir Lord Krsna, Lord of Hind, K.B., gazed with utter boredom at the antiseptic confines of the vast decontamination plant. His skin had been biologically engineered to a deep blue, to resemble the flesh of Khrisna, legendary avatar of the supreme deity Vishnu. This made him a living god to over a billion-and-a-half Indians, which made ruling somewhat easier and lots more fun. Clad in but a dhoti and sandals, he flashed an expanse of blindingly-white teeth beneath his impenetrably thick and wide

black moustache. "Ganesha, I have a poor head for figures and little time for production lectures. I have promised the people that I would bring the Taj Mahal out of the Wasteland, and thus restore Hind's glory. When will you be done?"

"That is what this whole tour has been leading to," said Ganesha in veiled exasperation. He too had been biologically engineered by fabulously wealthy parents to be taken for a Hindu god — given an elephant's head like his namesake the Lord of Categories. Ganesha pointed his trunk and a muscular arm to the row of stones that steadily streamed past on the backs of giant cockroaches charred to cinders. "Each of the billions of roaches must make the long journey deep into the radioactive wasteland to the Project and all the way back here. No small investment of time, no... Decontamination of the stones is not an easy process either. Robotic machinery would have been quicker, most surely, but out of the question to a Hind still recovering from the war."

"The whole belt of land straddling both Hind and Pakistan the Damned, hopelessly irradiated, ruined for centuries!" spat Krsna with unaccustomed emotion. "My land! What good is ending up the ruler 80 years later if half the country has been bombed into dust by those fools and their missiles? Shiva curse them!"

"It was indeed madness and almost the death of our nation," trumpeted Ganesha, "but has nothing to do with the matter at hand." Ganesha inserted the straw that protruded from a Mango-Cola bottle in his right hand into a trunk nostril and drained the fizzy orange concoction half-dry. "It is my honest estimate that at the present rate of 200 metric tons of stone per 24-hour period, we will have the Taj restored in all her glory by the year twenty ninety..."

He was interrupted by a great crash. One of the giant blocks of marble and the roach who carried it had fallen from the conveyor belt and onto the concrete floor. Free of his burden, a cockroach larger than usual specimen, dressed in tattered black leather and outfitted with steel legs, charged toward them with a horrid din. The roach ran straight up to Krsna and clasped his first four legs around the muscular calf of the Lord of Hind's right leg.

"Yeshoo Ice! Buddy G-Mo!" The blue-skinned God shrieked and looked in disgust at the huge insect now humping his leg. The great black moustache curled upward in disgust. A well placed kick from the mighty Krsna's free leg sent the insect sprawling. Gregor lay supine on the concrete,

a great gaping hole in his abdomen gushing white fat body — articulated steel legs waving wildly in his death agony.

Krsna looked down at the yellow-white fat body goo that oozed through the toes of his left foot. Quick thinking Ganesha drained the rest of his Mango-Cola and hosed his patron's foot off with a well aimed orange spray from his trunk.

"Kris N., how I hate those creatures," snarled Krsna, taking his own name in vain, brilliant teeth bared in disgust and anger, all pretense of serenity vanished. "I suppose the unclean thing thought it was worshipping me, humping me like that. Really distasteful, being adored by insects." He looked at it in puzzlement for a moment. "Are they supposed to have metal legs?"

Ganesha had bent down to study the shattered cockroach closely. The insect barely moved now. "This is indeed an unusual specimen. I've never seen its like before. It's been drastically modified, an admirable piece in my opinion, fine sutures and most clever metalwork..."

"But who did it?" demanded Krsna. "Is this one of your mad ideas?"

"Oh, my goodness, no," intoned Ganesha solemnly, "such sophisticated surgery! Loath as I am to surmise without concrete corroboration, I would have to suspect that this insect has been operated upon by his own kind."

"You mean they're that clever?"

"Oh, yes, most indubitably! And they appear to have evolved at an unanticipated pitch while laboring on the Project... This is a hitherto unknown, now discovered, primary factor in the recent production upsurge." He was delighted with himself. How very clever!

"Haven't you been watching? Checking up on them..."

"What need when they are, after all, only insects?"

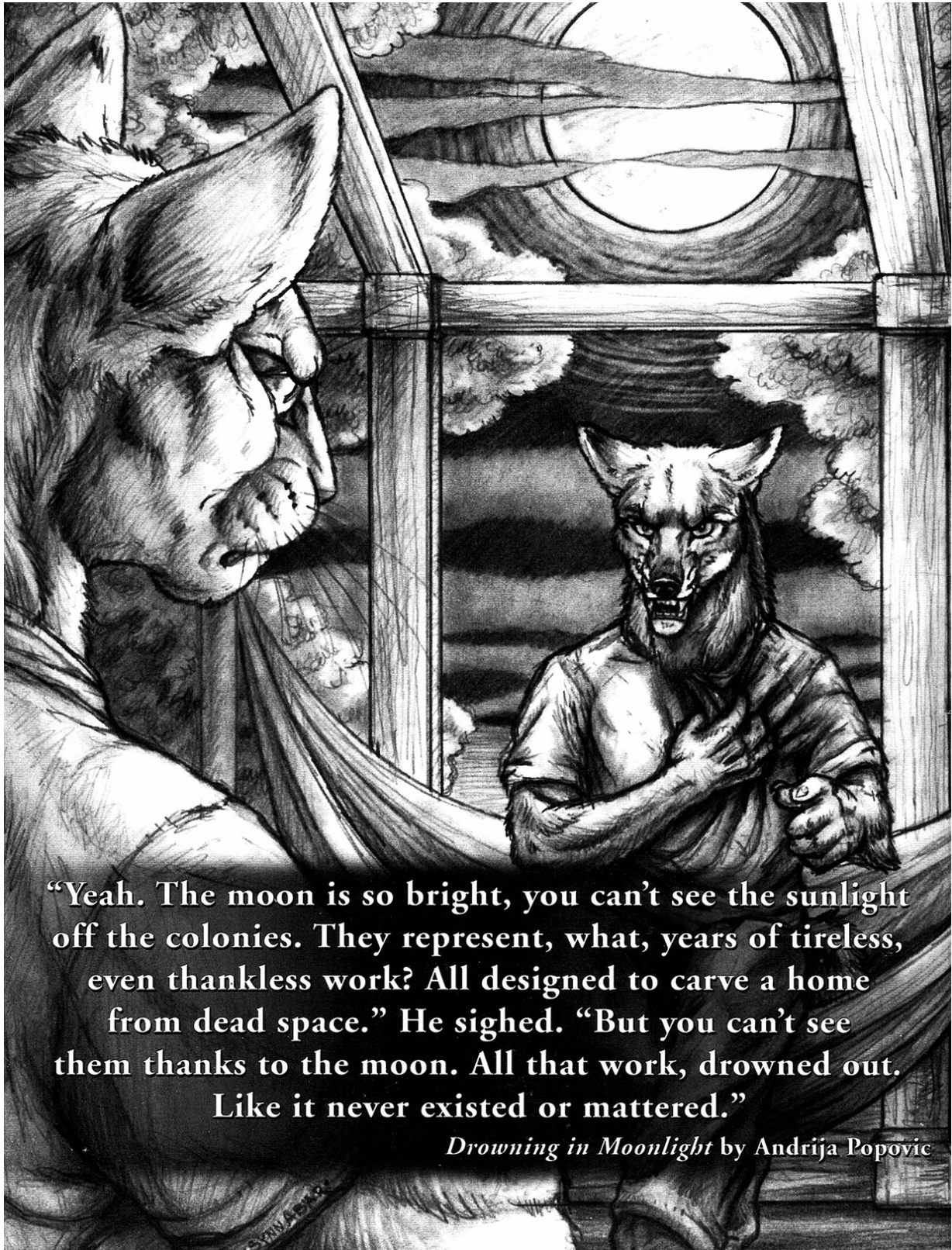
Krsna snorted derisively. "Insects that can march through Hell, and apparently engineer themselves as well as we can! Watch them closely from now on. Don't interfere as long as production keeps up, but once the Project is completed, send out a flying drone loaded with napalm and torch the whole lot of them! Shiva knows what they could get up to in that jungle by themselves!"

"A most sound plan," agreed Ganesha, "I shall make a mental note posthaste. In the meantime, if our business is completed, let us retire to the

terrace where my esteemed mother has graciously prepared a most delectable lunch."

The blue skinned God's mood perked up immediately. "Yes, let's!" Ganesha took him by the arm and the two of them sauntered off, their argument ceased.





“Yeah. The moon is so bright, you can’t see the sunlight off the colonies. They represent, what, years of tireless, even thankless work? All designed to carve a home from dead space.” He sighed. “But you can’t see them thanks to the moon. All that work, drowned out. Like it never existed or mattered.”

Drowning in Moonlight by Andrija Popovic